ChatGPT

Beyond the Far Downs

Chapter One: *The Wind in the Westfarthing*

Late summer lay warm and golden over the gentle hills of the Westfarthing. In a quiet little hobbit village near the Shire's western border, a young hobbit-lass stood barefoot in her vegetable garden. Daisy Brockhouse had kicked off her gardening clogs hours ago, and now her toes curled contentedly in the cool earth between rows of pumpkins. The afternoon sun slanted long and honey-yellow, catching motes of dust in the air as Daisy paused in her weeding to daydream. All around was the peaceful music of home: the soft **buzz of bees** among the bean blossoms, distant laughter of children at play, and the creak of a rocking chair on the front porch where her grandmother dozed.

For a moment Daisy simply basked in the familiar comforts of the Shire. She loved the earthy smell of the garden soil and the way the sunflowers nodded lazily over the garden gate. Beyond the hedgerows, she could see gentle green hills rolling away, dotted with sheep and split by neat lines of hedges. A **snug round door** led into her family's burrow behind her, and from its open windows floated the faint clatter of pans and a whiff of baking seed-cakes—no doubt her mother was busy in the kitchen. *All is as it should be*, Daisy thought, and a small smile played on her lips as she wiped her brow with the back of her hand, leaving a smudge of dirt across her cheek. It was an ordinary day in an ordinary hobbit-lass's life, and yet…

Yet Daisy felt a tug, a restlessness she could not quite name. As she straightened up from the pumpkin patch, a breeze drifted through the garden, stirring the broad pumpkin leaves and carrying with it a scent that made Daisy pause. It was **a scent not of the Shire**—a breath of something unfamiliar and alluring. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. There was a tease of salt, like the tang of a distant sea, mixed with the resinous freshness of pinewoods. For a heartbeat, Daisy's heart quickened. That breeze seemed to come from far beyond the borders of her little village, from lands she had only heard of in old tales. It whispered of places unseen, and it set her **daydreams spinning** like the seeds of a dandelion on the wind.

Her hazel eyes drifted westward, drawn beyond the neat lines of the fields to the far horizon. In the west, the land rose into the **Far Downs**—low green hills at the very edge of the Shire, hazy with distance this warm day. Often Daisy had gazed at those hills, wondering what lay on their other side. Now, as the breeze from afar faded and the familiar scents of hay and clover returned, a longing welled up in her. It was a feeling both exciting and unsettling, as if part of her were a kite tugging at its string, eager to sail off on the wind.

On the shady porch of the Brockhouse burrow, old **Grandmother Maggie** stirred and opened one eye. She had been dozing over her knitting, but a glimpse of her granddaughter standing idle at the gate, head tilted west, brought a knowing twinkle to her wrinkled face. With a creak of her rocking chair, she sat up and called out in a teasing voice, **"Bless me, Daisy-lass, you look all starry-eyed… not brewing an adventure, I hope?"**

Daisy started at her grandmother's call, and a flush rose in her cheeks. Caught wool-gathering at the garden gate, she quickly brushed off her apron and turned around. **"Oh! H-hello, Gran. I wasn't— I mean**

to say, it was just a daydream," she replied, flustered but trying to sound casual. She bustled back toward the pumpkin patch as if busy with a most important task of pinching off stray tendrils. **"Only a daydream, I promise."**

Grandmother Maggie chuckled softly, the lines at the corners of her eyes deepening with amusement. **"That's how it starts, dear. Just a daydream, indeed,"** she said, leaning on the porch rail. **"I've seen that look before. Why, I remember old Mr. Bilbo Baggins had the very same gleam in his eye, years ago, when he was always muttering about Elves and towers beyond the Far Downs."** The old hobbit lady's tone was fond, even a bit wistful at the memory. She peered westward herself for a moment, recalling bygone days when a younger Bilbo had returned from his journey full of tales that no one quite believed.

At the mention of **Bilbo Baggins**, Daisy's eyes lit up with curiosity. She had of course heard of that most peculiar hobbit who went on an **adventure** and lived to tell the tale. Bilbo had been gone from the Shire since before Daisy was born, but his legend lingered, especially here in the Westfarthing where folk still remembered his funny speeches and fireworks. **"Mr. Bilbo talked about towers beyond the Downs?"** Daisy asked eagerly, forgetting her embarrassment for the moment. She stepped closer to the porch, wiping her hands on her apron. **"What did he say, Gran? Are there really Elf-towers out there?"**

Grandmother Maggie's keen gaze softened as she regarded her granddaughter. Daisy's face was bright with youthful wonder, and it reminded Maggie of another eager hobbit from a time gone by. **"He did mention Elf-towers, yes,"** Maggie answered, nodding slowly. **"Tall white towers on the Tower Hills, if you believe the old tales. Bilbo claimed the Elves built them long ago, and that one of those towers held a magic stone through which Elendil himself could look across the Sea."** She chuckled, shaking her head. **"Most folk said it was just Bilbo's fancy. Babbling, they called it—especially when he spoke of seeing Elves on the horizon or catching their songs on the wind."**

Daisy was silent, hanging on her grandmother's words. The afternoon light glimmered in her eyes as she pictured it: ancient white towers far beyond the Shire, built by Elves, and some sort of seeing-stone for looking at distant seas. It sounded like a snippet from a fairy-story—or as the hobbits would say, a bit of *"nonsense or not?"*. Daisy wasn't sure if she believed such things, but the thought of it set her heart thumping with excitement. **"Do you think there are Elves there still?"** she ventured quietly. **"Out beyond the Far Downs?"**

Gran Maggie pursed her lips and gazed west again, where the sky was beginning to mellow toward late afternoon gold. **"Hard to say, dear. Not many Elves seen in these parts for quite a while now,"** she mused. There was a hint of melancholy in her voice. **"They're leaving Middle-earth, so folks say. Sailing off in ships from the Grey Havens. I reckon those towers might be empty now."** She sighed, then smiled kindly at Daisy. **"But empty or not, they've stood there longer than the Shire itself. If a body were to go that way, perhaps one might still feel something…special. Old Bilbo certainly thought so."**

A small, determined flame kindled in Daisy's chest at her grandmother's words. She imagined standing at the foot of an old Elven tower, ancient stones under her hands, and wondered if she might sense the **echo of enchantment** there. But noticing her own heart racing, Daisy ducked her head, suddenly shy of her own adventurous thoughts. She gave Gran a quick smile. **"Well, I had better finish tending these pumpkins before tea-time,"** she said, in a tone meant to sound practical. **"Daydreams won't rid the cabbages of slugs, after all."**

Grandmother Maggie hid a knowing smile and picked up her knitting again. **“That’s right. Plenty of work to be done, my girl. No time for adventures,”** she agreed in a mock-serious tone. **“See that you wash up before coming inside. Your mother will have our heads if we track mud on her clean floor.”**

Daisy laughed, the last of her blush fading, and bobbed a curtsey as she returned to her chores. **“Yes, Gran!”** she chimed. With that, she returned to the vegetable rows, dutifully plucking a few weeds and gathering a basket of ripe tomatoes and early autumn squash. But even as she worked, humming a little Shire walking-song under her breath, she could not entirely chase away the thrill that had stirred inside her. **Somewhere beyond those far green hills**, there were said to be wonders lingering—towers and memories of Elves, and the wide world that Mr. Bilbo had spoken of. Daisy’s mind wandered as she finished in the garden, wondering if she would ever see such things with her own eyes.

That evening, as the sun sank low and painted the western sky in hues of rose and orange, Daisy helped her mother prepare supper in their cozy kitchen. The round windows were open to the mild breeze, and the smell of stewed apples and spice mingled with the evening air. Daisy’s mother, **Belladona Brockhouse**, stood at the hearth stirring a pot of savory vegetable stew. She was a kindly, practical hobbit-matron with the same brown curls as Daisy, though threaded with a touch of silver at the temples. At the large oaken table in the center of the kitchen, Grandmother Maggie sat peeling potatoes with swift, practiced motions, and Daisy was slicing a loaf of brown bread fresh out of the oven. The warmth of the stove and the cheerful clutter of pans and dishes made the burrow feel especially snug as dusk gathered outside.

Supper at the Brockhouse home was a lively yet ordinary affair. As they all settled down at the table—Daisy, her mother and grandmother, her eldest brother Wilcome (called **Will** for short), and two younger siblings busy chasing each other until Mother shooed them to their seats—the talk flowed freely. They spoke of **small, homely things**, as hobbits love to do. Will had been out helping a neighbor with the wheat harvest that day, and he reported that the yield looked to be a good one, come Barnloft Fair. Mother mentioned that old Mrs. Thistledown down the lane was having her birthday party next week—**“a fine party of forty guests, so I hear, and we must remember to send over a seed-cake and our regards.”** Granny Maggie chimed in to say that she’d heard Aunt Petunia’s chickens were laying double-yolk eggs of late, which everyone agreed was either a marvelous boon or a sign of a coming thunderstorm. The two younger Brockhouse children giggled at this and attempted to peek out the window for any storm clouds, though the sky was clear as crystal. Daisy listened and laughed where appropriate, passing the butter and filling mugs with **sweet cider**, all the while feeling the gentle contentment of being surrounded by family.

Yet even in this dearest company, her mind strayed for an instant to that far horizon. As Mother and Gran cheerfully debated whether the herb garden needed replanting before first frost, Daisy found herself glancing toward the window. The sun had fully set now, and **twilight** spread a deep blue veil over the Shire. The conversation faded to a pleasant murmur in her ears as she gazed out at the darkening sky. Just then, **a single bright star** flickered into being above the silhouetted line of the western downs—**the very first star of evening**. It trembled in the sky, shining pure and clear, a beacon of silver in the twilight. Daisy caught her breath softly. Without even thinking, she spoke aloud a fragment of an old rhyme, a bit of a song she had learned as a little girl and never forgotten:

> **O Elbereth, clear are thy stars, and bright**
> **Eärendil rises on thy holy height;**
> **Shine on the lost and lonely that roam,**
> **Guide the wanderer and bring him home.**

Her voice was soft and lilting as she murmured the words, almost as if in a trance. The kitchen fell quiet for a moment. Daisy's mother paused in collecting the dishes, a gentle smile on her lips. **"What a pretty tune, dear,"** Belladona said. **"That's a new one—I don't believe I've heard it before. Wherever did you learn it?"**

Daisy blinked, as if waking up, and realized all eyes were on her. She blushed faintly, not accustomed to singing in front of everyone. **"I…I think it was something Mr. Bilbo taught us children, once,"** she said, tilting her head as she tried to recall. **"A long time ago, at Midyear's Day picnic. He said it was a translation of an** Elven song **about the stars."** She bit her lip, suddenly unsure if she ought to have brought it up. Bilbo's strange translations and poems were not to every hobbit's taste; some deemed them **"queer notions."**

But Belladona merely nodded with approval. **"It's lovely,"** she affirmed, patting Daisy's hand. **"Very fitting for a starry night."**

Grandmother Maggie, however, was quiet. She gazed at Daisy with a curious, thoughtful expression, as if seeing her in a new light. The verse had stirred something in the old hobbit's memory. She recalled Bilbo's voice, carrying on about **Earendil the Mariner** and Elven hymns to Elbereth, on nights long past. That Daisy should remember a bit of it and sing it now gave Maggie a mix of pride and a strange sorrow. **"Elven in origin, indeed,"** she murmured under her breath, almost inaudible. **"Trust Bilbo to have planted that seed."** But aloud she only said, **"Time to clear up, I think. Daisy-love, help me with these plates?"**

The spell of the moment was gently broken. Dishes were gathered, leftovers wrapped, and soon the kitchen was restored to order. One by one, the family drifted off to their routines: little Prim and Hal (Daisy's younger sister and brother) were ushered off to wash and to bed; Will settled by the hearth with a pipe and began recounting to Father (who had come in late from the byre) the tale of a comical mishap with a goat at the harvest field. Daisy's mother folded her apron and took up a bit of mending by the lamp-light. Grandmother Maggie, a quiet smile still on her face, retreated to her rocker with a cup of chamomile tea. The stars grew brighter outside, peeping in through the round windows.

Daisy herself slipped away as soon as her duties were done. She fetched a light shawl and stepped out the round front door, onto the **garden path lit with soft starlight**. The night air was cool on her face after the warmth of the kitchen. For a few minutes she wandered just beyond the porch, along the low stone wall that bordered their garden. The village around her was falling asleep: distant windows were snuffed out one by one, and an old horned owl hooted from the direction of the woods. Daisy breathed deeply, savoring the smell of dew on grass and the faint sweetness of night-blooming flowers. Over the dark line of the **Far Downs**, the evening star—**Earendil's Star**—still glimmered like a jewel on the brow of the sky. In her heart Daisy felt a welling of both peace and yearning, as if that star were calling to some part of her that was seldom awake.

After a little while, Daisy went back indoors. She bid her family goodnight—kissing her mother's cheek, giving Gran's shoulder a gentle squeeze, and smiling at her father and brother who were now chuckling over a shared joke. Taking a small candle-lantern in hand, Daisy headed down the hall to her own little room. It was a cozy chamber delved into the earth, with a round window of its own looking west. On a shelf above her wash-stand stood a row of Daisy's treasures: an acorn cup she'd painted with flowers, a brightly colored pebble from the Water, and a much-read copy of *Tales from the Green Dragon* (a collection of Shire

legends which she loved). She set the lantern on the bedside table and changed into her nightdress, the comfortable routine calming her fluttering thoughts.

But once Daisy blew out the lantern and climbed into her soft feather bed, sleep did not come. She lay on her back for a long while, eyes wide open, hands clasped on the coverlet. Through the round window above her, the night sky was sprinkled with **a thousand stars**, each in its familiar place. The **brightest of all** was still Earendil's Star, now high overhead, shining like **white fire**. Daisy's thoughts danced around the events of the day—the scent on the breeze, the talk of Elf-towers, the verse she'd remembered. It was as if pieces of a puzzle were falling into place, revealing a picture both exciting and a little frightening.

Her heart was so full that she felt she might never fall asleep. At last, Daisy sat up on her bed and reached her hand toward the window. The glass was cool under her palm as she pushed it open to feel the night breeze. Then, with a tentative wonder, Daisy held up her small hand against the sky, lining it up with the radiant star. Between her thumb and forefinger, the starlight seemed to glimmer, and she imagined for a fanciful moment that she **caught a drop of that light** in her keeping. She closed her hand gently, as though capturing that tiny sparkle, and pressed it to her chest.

"Soon," she whispered to herself in the darkness, her eyes shining. **"Soon I shall see for myself what lies beyond those far downs."** Saying it aloud startled her a little—yet once spoken, the resolve settled comfortably in her heart. Daisy Brockhouse, who had never in her life journeyed more than a half-day's walk from her village, had made up her mind. She would go, even if only for a day, to find those towers of legend and tread the hills where the Elves had walked. Perhaps it was a **Tookish streak** in her nature, or simply the call of something she was meant to do. Whatever the cause, Daisy felt a calm certainty wash over her, as though the stars themselves approved.

At peace with her decision, the young hobbit-lass lay back down and pulled the patchwork quilt up to her chin. She kept her window open a crack, and through it the night murmured a lullaby of distant crickets. In the sky Earendil's Star gazed down like a kindly eye. Daisy watched it until at last her eyelids grew heavy. Just before she drifted into sweet and dream-filled sleep, she fancied she heard a snatch of far-off music on the western breeze—a high, poignant **Elven note**, like a fragment of a lullaby from beyond the Sea. It faded almost as soon as it came, leaving Daisy with a single silver tear slipping down her cheek, though she did not know if it was sorrow or joy.

Thus, in the gentle cradle of that summer night, **Daisy's quiet adventure began**. Surrounded by the comforts of home yet enchanted by whispers of beyond, she took her first steps—small and secret—on the road of wonder. And while the Shire slept peaceful and unknowing, Daisy Brockhouse **dreamed of far green hills and a white tower under the evening star**, awaiting the dawn when her feet would finally carry her *beyond the Far Downs*.

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Chapter Two: An Unexpected Errand

A pale gold light crept through the round windows of the Brockhouse smial as morning dawned bright and clear. Daisy Brockhouse was already awake, lying on her back in bed and watching sunlit patterns dance on the ceiling. Today was the day. She had scarcely slept for excitement, and now a giddy energy filled her. She rose quietly so as not to wake her snoring younger brother in the next room and hurried to dress. If anyone asked, she would simply say she was going on a simple errand—nothing unusual at all for a sensible hobbit-lass.

Down the hall in the cozy kitchen, Daisy set about preparing a small wicker basket. Under the respectable pretense of gathering wildflowers and herbs from beyond the pastures, she meant to pack enough provisions for a much longer walk. She cut a round of yellow cheese and wrapped it in waxed paper, then added a pair of crusty bread rolls left over from yesterday's baking. Next came a little stoppered flask, which she filled with freshly brewed tea from the morning pot—no hobbit in her right mind went on a walk without tea to sustain her. As she busied herself, Daisy's fingers trembled slightly. It felt almost like preparing for an adventure (though of course she reminded herself it was nothing of the sort). "Just a little outing to pick flowers," she whispered under her breath, as if to reassure herself. Still, her pulse quickened and a smile kept creeping onto her face.

Her mother's voice suddenly came from the doorway, warm and a touch curious. "You're up early, dear. What are you about this morning?" Mother stood with her sleeves rolled to the elbow, a dusting of flour on her apron—she must have been kneading dough for bread. Daisy nearly jumped, but she turned and tried to appear nonchalant as she tied her basket lid shut.

"I thought I might walk out by the far meadows, Mama," Daisy said, hoping her voice sounded casual. She mustered a sunny smile. "The wildflowers are in bloom. I could gather some nice ones for the table, and perhaps a bit of sage and chamomile for the pantry."

Her mother's face softened into a pleased grin. "That's kind of you, Daisy-love. We could certainly use a few sprigs of sage before supper." She stepped forward to brush an unruly curl from Daisy's forehead in a motherly fussing way. "It should be safe enough close to home, but mind you don't wander too far, dear."

"I won't, Mama. I'll be careful," Daisy promised. And she truly meant it—at least, as far as her mother need ever know. She had every intention of returning by evening, just as a proper hobbit should. After all, it was only a little excursion. She would peek at the Elf-towers from afar and hurry home in time for supper.

Her mother eyed the well-packed basket in Daisy's hand and the stout walking shoes on her feet. A knowing glint came into her eye, as if she suspected that her daughter's "little outing" might lead farther afield than usual. But she said nothing more of it. Instead, Mother turned to pluck a folded wool cloak from a peg by the door. "Take your cloak with you," she insisted, draping it over Daisy's arm. "It may be sunny now, but the weather can turn before you know it."

“And here—” Mother reached behind the umbrella stand and produced a stout wooden walking stick, nearly as tall as Daisy herself. It was well-sanded and well-loved, with a knob at the top polished by years of handling. Daisy recognized it as belonging to her eldest brother, who carried it on rambles across the Shire. Mother pressed it into Daisy’s free hand. “Take your brother’s stick, just in case you meet a pesky badger or step in a rabbit hole.”

Daisy couldn’t help but laugh lightly. “All right, Mama. I’ll watch out for badgers, I promise.” She slung the cloak around her shoulders and accepted the stick. On a sudden thought, she patted the pocket of her apron to check for a small square of fabric. Yes—a clean handkerchief was tucked safely there. Daisy was determined not to dash off unprepared, the way old Mr. Bilbo Baggins reportedly had on his adventure. Satisfied that she had everything—basket, provisions, cloak, stick, and handkerchief—she turned back to her mother. She caught the older hobbit in a swift hug, the brim of her own straw hat bumping against her mother’s chin. “Thank you,” Daisy murmured. Excitement fluttered in her stomach like a hummingbird, but she steadied herself with a deep breath.

Her mother smiled and opened the round front door. Morning sunlight streamed into the hallway, along with the fresh scents of dew on grass and late summer blossoms. Daisy stepped out onto the neat flagstone path, blinking in the warm light. “I’ll be back this evening!” she called, trying to sound as casual as if she were off to market.

From the doorstep, her mother called after her one last reminder: “Don’t stray too far, Daisy-love, and be back by sunset!” She stood shaded by the doorway, hands on hips in gentle admonishment.

“Back by sunset – I promise!” Daisy replied brightly over her shoulder. She gave a final wave and set off down the lane at an eager pace, the basket bouncing on her arm.

As she walked away from her cozy home, Daisy felt a small tug of guilt mix with her excitement. She hadn’t exactly lied to her family—she truly did intend to bring back herbs and wildflowers—but she was also venturing much farther than she’d admitted. They were trusting her to be sensible. After a dozen paces, she dared a glance back. Her mother was still standing in the doorway of their green-fronted smial, watching until Daisy would be out of sight. Daisy bit her lip. “It’s just a bit farther than usual,” she whispered to herself. “No harm in a little exploring… I’ll be perfectly fine.” Perhaps she had stretched the truth a tad, but she comforted herself that it was a harmless bending. After all, even the most respectable hobbit might keep a small secret if it spares their loved ones a worry.

With that thought, the knot of guilt in her belly eased, and Daisy’s steps grew lighter. A thrill bubbled up inside her chest. Her Tookish side—surely inherited from some adventurous Took ancestor—stirred with quiet glee now that she was truly on her way. She had never done anything like this before. Off beyond the village, beyond even the far hedge of the Shire! Daisy drew in a deep breath of the late-morning air, sweet with grass and clover, and felt her spirit soar. A grin blossomed on her face despite herself. The adventure (for at last she allowed herself to think of it as such) had begun.

The lane wound between hedgerows and neighboring hobbit-holes with tidy gardens. It was a fine morning in the Westfarthing. Golden sunshine slanted across little front yards where washing hung on lines and late roses climbed trellises. As Daisy passed the stone well at the crossroads, she encountered old Mrs. Thistledown, who was out sweeping her doorstep. The grey-haired hobbit matron greeted Daisy with a wave and a cheery, “Good morning!” clearly pleased to see someone up and about so early. Daisy paused

just long enough to explain that the day was too fair to waste indoors and that she was walking to the meadows to gather wildflowers and a few herbs. Mrs. Thistledown thought it a lovely idea; she added that if Daisy happened to see her cousin (who was picking mint by the brook that week), to be sure to send along her regards. Daisy promised she would. With a warm goodbye and a renewed spring in her step, she continued down the lane.

Before long, the round doors and chimneys of her village were behind her, and open fields lay ahead. The road narrowed to a rutted cart-track between expanses of pasture. Daisy could see her destination in the distance: the gentle green slopes of the Far Downs, rising like a soft, rolling line against the western sky. They beckoned her onward, and she felt her feet eager to maintain a brisk pace.

A low stone wall now bordered the path, beyond which stretched acres of farmland. In one field, rows of barley swayed faintly in the breeze, nearly ripe for harvest. In another, wheat sheaves stood stacked in golden stooks. Daisy passed a gate where a bay pony swished its tail at flies. Just ahead, she spotted Farmer Hartfoot hefting a sack onto a wagon bed. He paused when he saw Daisy approach, and propped his elbows on the fence rail with a broad grin.

“Mornin’ to ye, Miss Brockhouse!” the old farmer hailed. His face was ruddy and round, framed by wispy white sideburns, and his eyes twinkled with friendliness. “Fine day for a wander, ain’t it just?”

“Couldn’t ask for better weather, Mr. Hartfoot,” Daisy agreed, coming to lean a moment on the fence.

The farmer’s gaze traveled to the walking stick in her hand and the well-filled basket on her arm. He chuckled, wiping his brow. “Just mind you don’t go tumblin’ into any rabbit holes now, Daisy! We’d hate to have to send a shirriff after you, like in one of them old tales.”

Daisy blushed and laughed. “No fear of that, sir! I’ll watch my step. I plan to be back well before supper, never you worry.”

“That’s the ticket,” he said with a wink. “Safe travels, lass!” With a genial wave, Farmer Hartfoot returned to his work, and Daisy continued on her way. His teasing words had been lighthearted, but they only fanned the bright excitement in Daisy’s heart. The *old tales* indeed… If only he knew! She was not about to tumble down a rabbit hole, but she was headed somewhere that even a curious farmer might think twice about. Daisy gripped her stick a little tighter and walked on, smiling to herself.

At length, she left the last familiar barn and hayrick behind. The neat fields grew more sparse, hemmed in by a brambly hedgerow marking the limit of the tended lands. Beyond it, the ground began to rise in gentle undulations: the beginning of the Far Downs. Daisy followed a narrow footpath through a gap between hawthorn bushes, and there she came upon the old stone stile that stood at the hedgerow’s end – the very edge of the Shire.

She approached the mossy stile slowly, her heart quickening. It was an unassuming little gate, really – just two weathered stone posts set on either side of a low break in the hedge-bank, with a couple of flat stepping-stones in between. Yet those grey stones were capped with lichen and tufted with emerald moss, and they felt ancient as anything in the Shire. Local folk said the stile had stood since the Shire was first settled, a silent boundary-marker of the western border. Daisy ran her fingers over one rough, cool pillar. A

tiny beetle crawled across the stone, as if it too were journeying west. Daisy's hand was trembling ever so slightly.

"This is it," she whispered to herself. "The edge of my little world." Just beyond the stile, the grass of the downs beckoned – lush and green, but growing tall and free, untrimmed by any gardener's shears. The air that drifted through the opening carried a fragrance that made Daisy catch her breath. It was still the scent of summer grass and clover, but mingled with something unfamiliar: a hint of wild thyme and, beyond that, a faint tang like salt or pine. The smell tickled some memory of distant places that Daisy could not quite recall except in dreams. It was the scent of the wider world, just a few steps away.

Daisy hesitated for a long moment, standing at the threshold of the Shire. A vision of her snug bedroom flickered in her mind: her quilt, her books of old tales, the sun peeping through the round window this very morning. That life was safe and comfortable and ordinary. And here she was about to step out of it into who-knew-what. Her grandmother's teasing words from yesterday came back to her: *"Starry-eyed, are we? Not brewing an adventure, I hope!"* Daisy felt a quiver in her chest, but she had to grin at herself. If only Gran could see her now. "It's not an adventure… it's just an errand," she murmured under her breath, as if answering her grandmother. "An unexpected errand, that's all." Saying it aloud gave her courage. In her heart, though, she knew this *was* a little adventure – and that thought was both thrilling and sobering.

She drew one more deep breath, planted her hands firmly on the mossy stones, and climbed up the stile. For an instant, as she balanced atop the middle stepping-stone, Daisy felt suspended between two worlds. Then she hopped down to the other side.

She was outside the Shire.

A soft gasp escaped her. Though the grassy slope ahead looked much like the fields she knew, something was subtly different. The sky seemed wider, the breeze a touch cooler and more playful as it lifted a curl of her hair. As if in welcome, a lively wind came running over the downs from the west, tugging at her skirt and cloak. It was like an encouraging whisper: *Come along, then!* Daisy's heart leapt. A laugh of pure delight bubbled out of her before she could stop it. She had done it! It was a small step for any traveler, perhaps, but for Daisy Brockhouse it was monumental. She might well be the first hobbit from her village in many years to set foot beyond that old hedge.

Ahead of her, the green downs rolled away in gentle hillocks under the late-morning sun. She could make out a faint trail in the grass, as if a narrow path of old had been pressed by the passing of sheep or the occasional wandering shepherd. Daisy shifted the basket on her arm and set off westward along this little track. The turf felt springy and soft beneath her feet, dotted with tiny white daisies (how fitting, she thought with a grin). She straightened her back and gripped her walking stick, resolved to follow this path until perhaps it brought the distant Elf-towers into view. Overhead, the sky was a radiant blue, with a few high wisps of cloud stretching thin as gauze. Her fear and hesitation were falling away with each step. What remained was a fizzy excitement and a quiet sense of pride. The hardest part—leaving home—was done. Now her journey had truly begun, and it had begun in the most gentle way imaginable: a bright summer morning, an open road, and not a soul wishing her ill.

Daisy's heart brimmed with happiness and relief. Humming to herself, she walked on, letting the warm sun caress her face. Almost without thinking, she began to sing softly under her breath, the tune rising and falling in time with her footfalls. It was an old walking-song that many hobbits hummed on their rambles, a

simple ditty she had learned as a small girl. Clearing her throat a little, Daisy let the cheerful words spill out on the breeze:

The road runs over gentle hills,
Through clover, hay, and barley,
I'll follow it for a league or three
And be home for supper, surely!

She laughed as she sang the final line, for in truth her stomach was already beginning to wonder what might be on the supper table this evening. Hobbits can't help it — even on little adventures, one eye is on the road and the other is on the pantry. Daisy gave her midsection a fond pat. *Don't worry,* she thought wryly toward her belly. *We'll be home in time for supper – after we've seen what we came to see!*

As her light laughter faded, a trill of birdsong drifted down from above. Daisy glanced up in surprise. A small brown lark had sprung from the meadow and now soared in widening circles against the blue, pouring out a cascade of bright notes. Daisy shaded her eyes with one hand, watching the tiny singer climb higher and higher. Its song was so merry and carefree that she felt it must be serenading the morning itself – or perhaps encouraging one small hobbit onward. Daisy's heart swelled at the sound. Under that clear sky, with the lark's music ringing in her ears, she felt as free as a bird herself. In the simple act of walking beyond the borders she had always known, Daisy felt a joyous rush of liberation.

For a moment she halted, turning to look back east. Far behind, she could just discern the line of hedgerow that marked the Shire's edge, and beyond it the chimneys of her village rising faintly from the patchwork of fields. Daisy raised her hand in a playful little salute – a silent *farewell for now* to her home. Then she faced west again, towards the unknown. Whatever might lie over the next hill – be it the gleam of an Elf-tower or simply more sunny downs – she was determined to find out. Tucking a stray curl behind her ear, Daisy Brockhouse stepped forward and continued along the green, sunlit track, humming as she went. Her quiet errand had indeed become something rather unexpected… and she couldn't have been happier to begin.

ChatGPT

Chapter Three: Over Grass and Heather

The sun had climbed well above the late morning horizon as Daisy Brockhouse walked westward along a gentle ridge of the downs. Behind her lay the Shire, now just a green memory beyond the hedge and the farthest barn, and before her the wide, open country rolled away under a pale summer sky. The lark that had sung overhead when she first crossed the mossy stile was but a distant trilling now, lost in the vast stillness of the Far Downs. Daisy's heart was light; with each step she felt a heady mix of liberation and wonder, as if the very breeze from the west were urging her onward.

All around her the downs rippled away in green waves, like an endless grassy sea under the sky. The turf was soft and springy underfoot, dotted here and there with clusters of wildflowers. Low bushes of gorse studded the slopes, shining with golden blossoms, and broad patches of purple heather spread like a royal carpet over the hollows. When the breeze swept over the hills it carried a wild, sweet scent – honeyed heather mixed with the faint spice of gorse – a fragrance utterly unlike the cozy aroma of tilled fields and baking bread back in the Shire.

There were no roads or lanes here in the unkempt country. Daisy walked where she pleased across the rises and dips of the land, sometimes following a faint trail where the grass lay bent or a pair of wheel-ruts showed briefly in the turf. Perhaps a farmer's cart or a drover's wagon had once come this way, or a shepherd driving her flock; but now the path was so overgrown that she often lost it among tangles of heather and fern. Once she paused to pluck a tuft of white wool from a gorse-bush, proof that some wandering sheep had passed and left a bit of its fleece behind. Apart from such little signs, the world around felt utterly empty of people. Yet far from frightening her, the solitude made Daisy's spirits only soar higher. She had the whole wide downs to herself, and the freedom was exhilarating.

At one point, Daisy paused on a sunny slope to do a very hobbit-like thing. She sat down, tugged off her sturdy walking shoes, and wriggled her toes happily in the grass (hobbits are quite fond of going barefoot whenever possible, and Daisy needed little excuse). The soft turf was cool and pleasant, and she laughed to herself as she dug her toes into the green. After a contented moment, she tucked the shoes into her basket for safekeeping and set off again barefoot. The gentle hills welcomed her feet with every step, as if the land itself were pleased to feel a hobbit's soles upon its wild, unshod grass.

By late morning, Daisy began to notice subtle signs that even these empty downs had known travelers before her. On the side of a hill she nearly stumbled over a row of low, tumbled stones hidden in the heather. They ran in a rough line, half-sunk into the turf and draped with ivy, as though they had once been a wall or fence. Daisy paused, tilting her head in curiosity. Who would build a wall in so lonely a place, so far from any present village? Perhaps some boundary-marker of the Shire long ago, or even a remnant of the old kingdom of the Big Folk, if the tales were true. She could not say, but the sight of those weathered stones gave her a delightful shiver. It was as if the land were quietly whispering that it had stories of its own, even if no one remained to tell them.

Not long after, as the sun climbed toward noon, she heard the trickle of water and followed the sound into a small hollow. There, a clear spring bubbled up beneath a flat grey boulder and ran in a slender streamlet

down the slope. Gratefully, Daisy knelt to refill her flask and splash cool water on her face. As she leaned against the old boulder, she noticed faint scratches and lines upon its surface. Leaning closer, she realized they were carvings – letters or runes, almost worn away by wind and weather. She traced a fingertip over them, but they were too faded to read. Perhaps it was writing in some dwarf-script or an Elven mark like those Mr. Bilbo used to speak of. Whoever made them had been here in elder days, carving a sign by this little spring. The thought sent a thrill through Daisy's heart. Here she was, in a place not marked on any Shire map, touching the same stone once touched by wanderers long forgotten. It made the world feel suddenly larger and older than she had known, and herself a small and curious part of it.

By noon the summer sun was near its peak, and Daisy's curls were sticking to her forehead with sweat. Spotting a lone oak tree atop a knoll, she decided it was the perfect place to rest and take a bite to eat. The great oak stood guardian on the hill, its leaves murmuring softly in the light breeze. Gratefully, Daisy sank down in the dappled shade at its roots. "Time for luncheon, I daresay," she sighed to herself cheerily, slipping off her basket. Talking aloud in an empty field might seem odd to some, but it is a habit not uncommon among hobbits on solitary walks (one must have someone to chat with, even if it is just oneself). Daisy laid out a hearty brown bread roll and a wedge of cheese, along with her flask of cool tea. As she nibbled and sipped, she gazed out over the rolling landscape and marveled at how far she had come since morning.

For a few minutes she let herself daydream. What would it be like if some wandering adventurer – or even an Elf – happened upon her here under the oak? Daisy brushed the crumbs from her skirt and stood, indulging her fancy. She swept a playful curtsey toward an imaginary newcomer. "At your service, sir," she declared softly, then immediately giggled at her own affected formality. It was just as well no one was there to see her talking to empty air. Undeterred, Daisy tried again, this time dipping even lower in a polite bow. "At your service, and your family's service," she said in a high, gracious tone that made her burst into laughter. "Oh Daisy, you goose!" she chuckled, covering her blushing face with her hands. Truly, she felt quite ridiculous – but in a way, it was reassuring. Pretending for a moment to be a proper traveler greeting lords and ladies made her feel a little braver, even if only a curious old oak had witnessed her antics.

She finished her simple meal and leaned back against the oak's broad trunk. A soft breeze whispered through its leaves, and far off a lone hawk circled in the shimmering sky. From this height, Daisy could see back the way she had come: eastward, the lands rolled back toward the Shire, though her village was hidden beyond many folds of green. Westward, the downs rose and fell in ceaseless succession. Somewhere on that horizon lay her goal. Wiping her mouth and packing away her things, Daisy wondered how much farther the Elf-towers might be. Sunset was still hours away, she reasoned; she had time yet to go on a bit further and perhaps get a clearer glimpse of those storied towers. With a resolute nod, she slung her basket once more over her arm, gave the old oak a thankful pat, and set off along the ridge.

After a couple more miles, the bright enthusiasm of the morning began to wane. The day was growing hot and still, and Daisy's feet were starting to feel the hours of walking. The golden sunlight that poured over the hills now made her drowsy. Aside from the rhythmic swish of her own steps through the grass and the distant drone of insects, all was quiet. She was truly alone under the immense sky, and for the first time Daisy felt a touch of lonesomeness. The very emptiness that had thrilled her earlier now made her aware of how small a hobbit she was in these great wide downs.

Determined to shake off the creeping melancholy, Daisy decided to make her own noise for company. At first she tried humming the same walking-song she had sung that morning, but it petered out after a verse.

Something more lively was called for. So, planting her hands on her hips, she cleared her throat and recited in a bold, sing-song voice:

Oliphaunt, oliphaunt, mighty and grey,
Treading the forest, you thunder your way;
With tusks like a plough and ears like a sail,
We dream of your presence in faraway tale.

Her voice rang out over the empty hills. The absurd little rhyme about the mythical giant beast made her smile – especially as she imagined such an impossible creature trumpeting across the quiet downs! Emboldened by the sound of her own voice, Daisy thought of another rhyme, one that her brother used to chant to make her laugh. It was about a lazy hobbit lad who wandered too far from home and got exactly what he deserved. Giggling, she took up her walking-stick like a pretend sword and gave the old nursery rhyme a try:

There once was a hobbit who napped by a brook,
A goose bit his toe just to give him a spook;
He leapt and he ran, in terror he fled,
Never again to nap where the wild paths led.

By the time she finished the final line, Daisy was laughing out loud. Her clear voice and laughter echoed in the still afternoon air, startling a hiding skylark into flight. It was certainly an odd sight – a lone hobbit-lass brandishing a stick and reciting rhymes to the breeze – but she felt much better for it. The loneliness ebbed from her heart, chased away by the familiar silliness of Shire verses. She shook her head, still chuckling at the image of that foolish hobbit lad hopping home with a goose after him. “That goose showed him, eh!” she quipped wryly to no one, and then resumed her march with a decided spring in her step.

Time passed, and hill after hill fell behind her. The Far Downs were far broader than Daisy had imagined; each green ridge she crossed revealed another beyond, and then another beyond that, like waves on the sea. Still she kept on, driven by the memory of that distant glimpse of the Tower Hills. The sun rolled westward as she walked. At length the grassy slopes began to rise higher again, building toward what looked to be one of the tallest downs she had yet encountered. A few woolly clouds had gathered in the sky, and their shadows now dappled the landscape with gentle blues and golds. Daisy’s breath grew quicker as she made the final climb, her feet pressing into the soft turf that glowed in the late daylight. Some intuition told her that from the summit of this ridge, she might at last see what lay beyond all these downs.

Sure enough, upon reaching the crest, Daisy beheld a sight that made her catch her breath. The world beyond opened wide and clear. In the far distance to the west, beyond the rippling leagues of lesser hills, there stood three green heights taller than the rest. Three hills – yes, she could distinctly count them, side by side against the sky. And atop the tallest hill a tiny point of white glimmered, reflecting the sun like a star caught on earth. Daisy’s heart leapt into her throat. There at last were the Tower Hills of legend, the very Elf-towers she had dreamed of seeing! They were still a long day’s journey or more away, but unmistakable all the same. In the golden light they seemed almost magical – the distant emerald slopes crowned with that pale gleam of stone.

For a long moment, Daisy simply stood and stared, filled with awe. The sight was both glorious and unsettling. A childhood fancy had become real before her eyes, and it made her realize how far from home

she truly was. She felt small – small but also strangely bold, to have come even this far. A tremor of emotion ran through her: part joy, part fear. “They’re real… the Elf-towers,” she whispered, hardly aware she had spoken.

At last she blinked and drew a deep breath. The sun was sagging westward, and shadows began to stretch east behind every hill. Only the towers ahead still shone, catching the day’s last bright rays. Daisy’s promise to be home by sunset weighed suddenly on her mind. If she turned back now and retraced her steps, perhaps she could reach her village soon after nightfall… perhaps. She pictured her mother watching anxiously at the door as the stars peeped out. She imagined the disappointment (and fright) her family would feel if she crept in late, or not at all. Daisy bit her lower lip. This adventure had been meant to last just a day. Home and supper and safety lay back the way she had come; a responsible hobbit would turn around at once.

And yet – she turned her gaze again toward those distant hills and felt an almost irresistible pull. The towers beckoned to her, silent and shining on the horizon. How could she go back now, when wonder itself was waiting out there? Daisy’s foot edged forward unconsciously. "Just a little farther," she murmured under her breath. She knew in her heart she had already come too far to turn away at the very threshold of something extraordinary. The cool western breeze lifted her curls and the hem of her skirt, as if nudging her onwards. She clutched her shawl around her shoulders, steadied her racing heart, and stepped down the far side of the ridge.

The decision was made. With the sun dipping lower and gilding the hilltops in honeyed light, Daisy Brockhouse continued west toward the Tower Hills. In that quiet moment, as the first hints of evening stole into the sky, she felt both tremulous and triumphant. Whatever might come with nightfall, she would follow this road a little farther.

ChatGPT

Chapter Four: The Ring of Stones

Daisy pressed onward down the long slope of the high down, leaving behind the knoll where she had first glimpsed the distant Tower Hills. The late afternoon sun cast her shadow before her, long and thin upon the grass. As she descended, each step took her further into a broad hollow between gentle ridges. The golden light of early evening draped itself over the land, warm and benedictory. Daisy's heart was beating fast—partly from the steep walk, partly from the excitement still humming in her veins. She took a moment at the foot of the slope to catch her breath and looked back the way she had come. Far behind, the downs rolled eastward towards her home. There was a pang of guilt as she realized the sun was now sinking low; by rights she ought to be turning for the Shire. *They'll be starting supper round about now...* she thought with a twinge. But when she faced west again and saw the inviting line of hills in the distance, the high green shoulders of the Tower Hills touched with the sun's glow, she could not bring herself to turn back. "Just a little farther," she whispered to herself, repeating her promise from earlier. Her voice sounded small in the vast silence of the downs. Resolute, Daisy squared her shoulders and continued into the wide hollow, stepping lightly through knee-high bracken and tufts of gentle grass that brushed against her skirts.

The hollow spread out before her like a great green bowl, quiet and still. The only sounds were her own footfalls swishing through the grass and the soft sigh of a faint breeze stirring the heather and clover. In this sheltered vale the wind was only a breath, barely enough to ripple Daisy's light brown curls. The air felt cooler here in the dip of the land, and carried a rich scent of earth and late-summer grass, with a hint of something fresh—perhaps a stream or spring hidden among the folds ahead. The sky above was deepening from bright blue to a softer hue, as the sun dipped closer to the rim of the western world. Long shadows of distant ridge-lines began to stretch over the hollow's eastern side. Daisy walked on, feeling very small amidst these great rolling downs, but not lonely. There was a hush over the land, a kind of expectant quiet as if the hills themselves were holding their breath at day's end. Even the insects seemed to have ceased their buzzing for now; she caught the occasional chirp of a cricket among the grass, but it was muffled and drowsy. The tranquility was so complete that Daisy found herself moving more carefully, almost tip-toeing, unwilling to break the silence. It felt as though she had stepped into some old, peaceful dream of the world, where every blade of grass and every pebble drowsed in golden light.

About the middle of the hollow, Daisy's eyes were drawn to a small rise of land set off to her left, a little island of higher ground in the vale. Atop that knoll stood a curious ring of grey standing stones. Daisy halted, one hand rising to her throat in surprise. There were six or seven stones that she could see, arranged roughly in a circle. Each was tall—taller than a hobbit by far, perhaps the height of a large man or more—and weathered by untold years of sun and rain. They leaned at odd angles, as if frozen in the act of a slow dance, some bent slightly inward toward the center of the circle and others outward. Their surfaces were mottled with lichen and soft green moss. In places the pale grey rock showed through, catching the evening light on its edges. The stones cast thin, stretching shadows westward across the knoll. Wild clover and heather clustered around their bases, and a few strands of ivy clung to one stone like an old traveler resting against it. Daisy felt a thrill shoot through her. This was something entirely unexpected—an ancient and uncanny sight in the middle of the empty downs. A circle of standing stones, here of all places! She had heard of such things in old tales, whispered about on winter evenings by the hearth. Some said that in bygone days the Big Folk had raised rings of stone for their rituals, or that Elves had danced under them by

starlight. Others muttered that such circles were evil places, haunted by ghosts of long ago or used by trolls to mark where treasure lay buried. As a little girl Daisy had shivered at those stories and vowed never to wander near any standing stones at night. Now here she was in the flesh, happening upon just such a ring in the golden daylight.

Her first instinct was to duck down behind the nearest gorse-bush and watch from afar, half convinced that the moment she was seen, something might stir among those stark stones. Her heart pounded and she swallowed hard, recalling childhood imaginings of ghostly barrow-wights or great stone trolls that could come to life when darkness fell. The circle on the knoll was utterly still—no sign of life or movement. It was probably deserted, just some old relic from years beyond counting. *Don't be a goose, Daisy,* she chided herself silently. *They're only rocks. Old rocks, put here by… well, by someone… long ago.* If there were any ghosts, they were only in the nursery tales. Still, the place had a gravity about it that made her hesitate. She felt both drawn and a little afraid. A gentle evening breeze touched her cheek then, as if to reassure her. Daisy realized she had been holding her breath, and let it out in a small sigh. Curiosity was steadily overcoming fear in her inquisitive hobbit heart. After all, how often does one stumble on a mysterious ring of standing stones out in the wild downs? It might be the only chance in her life to examine such a wonder. And nothing dreadful was happening—no eerie lights, no ghoulish figures, only the quiet of the summer evening. Summoning her courage, Daisy rose from her cautious crouch and began to walk toward the stone circle.

The closer she got, the more massive the standing stones appeared. Up close, they towered over her humble hobbit height. The largest of them was at least three times taller than Daisy, looming like a great pillar. Its top was jagged, perhaps broken off in some ancient storm. Another stone leaned so far inward that it nearly met its opposite partner; between them they formed a kind of crooked archway leading into the ring. Daisy paused at the very edge of the circle. Her skin prickled with gooseflesh despite the warmth of the day's end. This close, the air felt different—thinner, somehow expectant. A silence lay here that was deeper than any quiet she had ever known, as if even the breeze dared not stir within the boundary of the stones. Daisy's heart fluttered and for a moment she considered turning on her heel and scurrying back down the knoll. But she mustered her nerve. With a deep breath, she took a few quick steps forward and crossed through the gap between two of the standing stones.

She stepped into the center of the circle. At that very moment, a faint sigh of wind went through the hollow, making the grasses murmur—but within the ring, the sound faded to nothing. Daisy found herself standing in a pool of stillness. Nothing moved. The air was gentle and warm, yet it was as if the world outside had paused. Daisy held her breath without even meaning to, her wide brown eyes sweeping around. Above her, the tall stones stood like silent sentinels in a ring. When she tilted her head to peer up at the sky, she could see a piece of the heavens framed by those ancient monoliths: clear and blue, but tinged with the first pastel hues of evening. Strangely, that patch of sky seen through the ring of stones seemed farther away than the sky elsewhere. It was as though by stepping into this circle, Daisy had passed through some unseen curtain and into a pocket of older time. She felt a tingling along her arms, a prickling at the back of her neck—not from fear exactly, but from the uncanny sensation that *something* was different here, something beyond her understanding. Time itself felt slow and thick. The golden light hanging in the air had a timeless quality, illuminating motes of dust that danced lazily and then froze in mid-flight. Daisy had the queer fancy that if she spoke, the very sound might come out echoing from years long past.

She turned in a slow circle, taking in every stone. Each was rough and pitted up close, mottled white and grey with age. In the stillness, Daisy felt an overwhelming awareness of the ancientness of this place. *How*

many centuries had these stones stood here like this? she wondered. *And who placed them here, and why?* The Big Folk of old? Giants, perhaps, for only giants could haul such rocks. Or maybe the Elves, in some forgotten age when the world was young? Daisy did not know of the Men of Westernesse, the Dúnedain of old who once wandered these lands, but her heart guessed that whatever hands had raised this ring were long gone indeed. Despite her earlier fear, she sensed no malice here—only deep, deep silence and a feeling as if unseen eyes were watching her. Not the harsh glare of a beast or enemy, but a gentle regard, like the kindly but curious gaze of an ancient grandfather watching a child at play. It was an odd fancy, and Daisy almost smiled at the thought. *Who could be watching me here, except perhaps Mr. Sun on his way down?* She felt utterly alone, and yet not lonely, in the center of the stones.

Boldened by the continued peace, Daisy wet her lips and spoke aloud into the hush: “Hello?” Her voice sounded hushed and very small. It did not ring out merrily as it might under an open sky; instead, it was absorbed by the circle and returned a moment later as a soft echo—*hello…*lilting back at her from some unseen corner. She twirled around, half expecting that someone had crept up behind her and whispered the word back. But there was no one—only the stones and the grass and a lonely dragonfly that drifted through the ring and away as if it had business elsewhere. Daisy felt foolish and a little relieved all at once. *Of course there’s no one here,* she thought. *What did you expect, you silly hobbit? A ghost popping out to bid you good evening?* Still, the echo of her greeting gave her a strange comfort, almost as if the hollow hills themselves had answered her in their own way.

She realized she had been holding her shoulders tensely, and made herself relax. The air inside the circle was warm—the lingering heat of the day’s sun seemed to be gathered and kept within these stones. Daisy reached out a tentative hand and laid her small palm against the nearest monolith. The stone felt sun-warmed and surprisingly smooth beneath the pads of her fingers, save where tiny patches of lichen made soft velvety spots. A ladybug was crawling across the stone’s face, navigating the tiny forests of moss; Daisy watched it for a moment, grateful for this little sign of ordinary life. “Well, you seem to like it here,” she murmured quietly to the ladybug. The sound of her own voice, calm and conversational, eased her mind further. Nothing terrible had happened at all. No sooner had she touched the standing stone than her fear began to melt away like mist under sunlight. The last of her goosebumps subsided. In their place came a feeling of awe and reverence. She patted the grey stone gently, as one might pat the flank of a familiar pony. It was easy to imagine that these stones were indeed alive in their own slow way, and that they were aware of her and glad of her gentle touch. “Who put you here, I wonder?” Daisy whispered, trailing her hand along an ancient crack in the surface. “And what have you seen, standing here for so long?” Of course, the stone gave no answer, but Daisy felt better for having asked. She liked to believe the stones didn’t mind her questions.

Near the base of the stone, where it met the earth, Daisy noticed a tiny white flower growing. It was a little star-shaped bloom with five delicate petals, no bigger than her thumbnail, trembling on a slender stem. It peeked out from a cushion of green moss right in the cranny between the stone and the soil. Daisy knelt down, marveling that anything so small and bright could thrive in the shadow of such great rocks. *What a lovely little thing,* she thought, smiling. Carefully, she reached and plucked the wildflower. Its stem was springy but yielded to her gentle tug. For a moment Daisy simply held it up, admiring the way its pearly white petals caught the light. Then she drew a long pin from the collar of her bodice—a spare hat-pin she had brought along—and used it to fasten the tiny flower to her collar. The white blossom stood out against the soft brown of her traveling cloak, like a little star fallen from the sky and caught on her breast. “There,” Daisy said, pleased, “a keepsake to remember this place by.” Somehow it felt right to take a token, a small memory of the circle of stones, as if this were a proper stop on her journey and the flower a blessing for the

road ahead. She curtsied then, very low and polite, to the ring of stones—as if they were lords and she a humble guest. It was a spontaneous, playful gesture that made her giggle at herself. Imagine, curtsying to stones! But it also felt respectful. “Thank you,” she added in a soft voice, not entirely sure whom she was thanking—perhaps whatever kindly presence seemed to dwell here.

Daisy stepped back out of the center, retracing her steps toward the gap between the two leaning stones. As she crossed the boundary of the circle once more, a tiny shiver passed over her, like the sensation of walking through a curtain of cool water. The spell of stillness that had hung inside the ring released its hold. All at once she heard the natural sounds of the hollow again: the whisper of the light breeze stirring the grasses, the distant cheep of a few evening crickets waking to their nocturne. The everyday world came rushing back, though it was still gentle and hushed around her. Daisy realized she had been smiling for who-knows-how-long; her cheeks felt slightly achey from it. A laugh bubbled up in her chest—relief and joy together. She laughed softly, a bright sound that skipped off into the vale. What a little goose she had been, quivering with fear at an old circle of rocks! And what a marvel that something which had given her such fright could turn out to be so peaceful and oddly comforting. She felt as if she had been held in a pair of great calm arms and then set back down lightly. Her heart, which had thumped like a drum upon approaching the stones, was now steady and strong, its rhythm sure. Stepping away down the knoll, Daisy glanced back over her shoulder at the grey standing stones. They stood silent and inscrutable as ever, wreathed in golden light on their hillock. But she fancied they looked somehow friendlier now—like a ring of old guardians who had acknowledged her courage and offered quiet approval. Daisy gave them a little wave. “Sleep tight,” she said softly, half feeling like a child bidding goodnight to fairy-tale sentinels. With that, she turned and continued on her westward way, more confident than before.

Climbing out of the hollow, Daisy ascended the next ridge beyond the stone circle. The slope was gentle here but long, rising up to one of the higher points of the downs. The exertion made her breathe a bit harder; she was grateful for the evening coolness that had begun to creep into the air now that the sun was so low. Up she went, zig-zagging around clumps of heather and avoiding a patch where the soil was damp (there must indeed be a spring somewhere nearby, trickling under the turf). As she climbed, the sky ahead of her deepened from gold to a rich honey-orange, and higher above that, to shades of rose and purpling blue. The west was aflame with the final glory of sunset. Daisy felt her spirit lifting with each step, drawn by that light as much as by her quest. She crested the ridge, a little out of breath, and there halted, stunned by the sight before her.

The Tower Hills were now plainly visible and much closer than when she had first spied them at midday. From this vantage point, only a shallow dale lay between Daisy and the first gentle slopes of those legendary hills. They rose tall and green, three proud heights against the western sky, their brows crowned with ancient trees and, on the tallest hill, the glimmer of something pale – like a tooth of ivory or a shard of pearl catching the sun. Daisy’s heart leapt. There indeed was the Elf-tower of old, the one Bilbo and her grandmother had spoken of in tales! Even at this distance she could see the suggestion of its shape at the hill’s summit: a single white tower, or what remained of it, facing the sunset. The sun itself was just dipping beyond the far side of the Tower Hills now, unseen from where Daisy stood, but it set the sky aglow behind them. The tallest tower was limned in that golden fire, turned almost to a pillar of light. The green slopes of the hills were bathed in a gentle radiance, and the shadows at their feet stretched long towards her across the intervening land. For a long moment Daisy simply stood there, one hand on her breast where the little white flower was pinned, and she gazed in wonder. This was the farthest west she had ever looked out upon, and it was more beautiful than she had dreamed. The towers of the legend were real, and she was perhaps only an hour or two’s walk from touching the very stones of the Elves.

A swell of emotion rose in her: awe and joy and a bittersweet ache all at once. *So it's real… it's all real,* she thought. *All the songs and stories… I'm nearly there.* She found that tears had sprung to her eyes without warning. Not of sadness, but a quiet overwhelming happiness mixed with longing. Daisy dashed them away quickly with the back of her hand and gave a shaky little laugh at herself. Crying over a distant view! Her brothers would tease her endlessly if they saw. But there was no one here but the whispering grass and the wind, which now gently stirred on the ridge-top, lifting the hem of her skirt and the curls at her temples. The breeze came from the west, smelling of something new—beyond the hills, perhaps the sea's breath or the scent of distant pines. It was refreshing and full of promise. Daisy inhaled deeply, filling her lungs. She felt at this moment that she stood truly upon a threshold: behind her lay the familiar lands of her home, now out of sight beyond rolling downs and growing dusk; before her stood the unknown, the extraordinary. With the sun's last light gilding her face, Daisy Brockhouse of the Shire lifted her chin and smiled into the coming night. She was not afraid. Her earlier fears—of loneliness, of ghosts or trolls, of getting into trouble for missing supper—had all dwindled like fading shadows. In their place was wonder. The world was wider and more magical than she had ever guessed while sitting by her cozy hearth, and she was a small but not insignificant part of it tonight.

At length the golden light began to slip away, melting into the horizon. The bright rim of clouds above the Tower Hills went from gold to pink, then to a deepening red and purple. The white tower on the hill lost its fiery gleam and became a soft grey silhouette against the ember-bright sky. Dusk was arriving swiftly. Daisy knew she should not linger much longer on this exposed ridge. Night comes quickly once the sun has set, and she had no wish to stumble around in total darkness. She had brought a little lantern in her basket, but she preferred to make use of the remaining twilight to find a path forward. The Tower Hills beckoned to her—they were so close now, close enough that she could imagine calling out and hearing an echo back from those slopes. Perhaps there might even be a safe spot at the foot of the hills where she could rest a few hours if night overtook her fully. *I'll just have to be brave and carry on,* she resolved. Home was far behind; turning back now, in darkness and alone, seemed much more daunting than pressing ahead to the friendly promise of the Elf-towers.

Wrapping her cloak more tightly around her (for the air was growing chill now that the sun had gone), Daisy began her descent down the western side of the ridge. The grass here sloped away into another fold of dim land, leading onward to the feet of the Tower Hills. As she went, long shadows uncurled around her. The eastern sky behind was deep indigo, and a few early stars pricked through the veil of dusk overhead—tiny silver pins in the darkening blue. A slender moon was also rising, pale and new, offering a faint glow. The last birdsong of the day had hushed; somewhere far off a nightjar trilled briefly and then fell silent. Daisy stepped carefully, humming a quiet tune to herself to keep her courage up—just a snippet of an old Shire walking-song under her breath. The words weren't important, it was the familiarity that comforted her. Each footfall became harder to see, but she trusted her feet and her stout walking-stick to find the way. Down and down she went, leaving the ridgecrest and its wide view behind. The world closed in a little as the slopes rose on either side of her, but ahead, against the western stars, she could still make out the dark shapes of the Tower Hills guiding her like gentle giants in the gloom.

Dusk deepened into true night while Daisy was partway down the ridge. By the time she reached the bottom of the slope, purple shadows pooled all around. She paused at a level space where a faint path wound forward through a thicket of gorse. Over her shoulder, far to the east, she could see a last glimmer of light—amber and remote—where the sun had gone, as if winking farewell to her from behind the world. **In the quiet of that moment, Daisy felt no regret at all for having come this far.** Yes, she would surely earn a stern scolding for her lateness when she finally returned home. But in her heart she knew it would

be worth it. She touched the little white flower on her collar with gentle fingers, a smile playing on her lips in the darkness. This small adventure was already changing her in ways she could barely name. Taking a deep breath of the cool night air, Daisy stepped forward once more, her feet light and her spirit steady. In the valley ahead, the shadows were growing thick and the first crickets of night had begun their chorus. The great hills stood watch under the evening sky, drawing her onward. And so, with wonder quietly blossoming inside her, Daisy disappeared into the soft shadows, continuing west beyond the far downs as dusk at last gave way to night.

ChatGPT

Chapter Five: Under the Oaks of Elostirion

Daisy stepped softly under the eaves of the old oak wood, where the hillside climbed steeply toward the western sky. All about her the night was deep and still. The last glow of dusk had long faded behind the distant downs, and now a bright autumn moon hung above the trees, bathing the forest in silver. Moonbeams fell in slender shafts between gnarled branches, illuminating patches of the path before her. In that cold radiance, every leaf and stone seemed etched with uncanny clarity, yet beyond the light lay pockets of darkness where her hobbit lantern cast trembling shadows. It was **full night**, and Daisy Brockhouse was far from home, walking under ancient oaks in the hush of a place out of legend.

She clutched her walking stick in one hand and her little lantern in the other as she made her way upward. The air under the trees was cool and carried a faint scent of moss and damp leaves. Beneath the canopy, the ground was blanketed in old oak-leaf mulch that muffled her footfalls. Now and again her toe struck something hard half-buried in the soil – the edge of a **paving stone**, cracked and weathered. Daisy realized with a thrill that these were remnants of an *ancient road* or stair that once led up to the Elf-tower. The smooth white stone peeked out from tangles of ivy and knotted oak roots that had grown over centuries. She ran her fingers along one such stone as she passed, marveling at how even in ruin it felt finely made. Here indeed was proof that her journey had brought her to a place *very* old and extraordinary. The feeling of great age was all around; it emanated from the twisted trunks of the oaks and the silent, lichen-crusted stones underfoot. Daisy's heart fluttered with awe. She could almost imagine tall grey figures walking this way long ago, beneath these same boughs.

Yet with the awe came **unease**. The night was so quiet that each rustle she made seemed loud. There were no villagers' lamps here, no comforting sounds of hearth and home—only the sigh of a breeze high in the oak leaves and the soft scrape of her own steps. Daisy paused to catch her breath under a particularly huge oak. Its roots coiled over the old path like sleeping dragons. She realized her hands were trembling slightly, whether from the climb or nerves she could not tell. "Steady on, Daisy," she whispered to herself, and her voice sounded very small in the stillness. Far above, the bright moon peered down between the branches, and its gentle light fell upon her upturned face. The moon had always been a friendly sight to hobbits abroad at night, and Daisy mustered a smile, drawing courage from its presence. In that pale glow, the darkness did not feel so absolute. The **silver light** mingled with the warm orange flicker of her lantern, and for a moment Daisy's fear eased, replaced by a sense of quiet wonder. How strange and lovely the world was, here under the oaks of Elostirion with starlight glimmering through the leaves!

The path wound onward, and Daisy followed, careful of snagging brambles and roots. The higher she climbed, the more the feeling grew that the forest itself was watching. The hair on her neck prickled, though she kept telling herself it was only the chill. Every now and then she thought she saw a shape move at the corner of her eye—just a branch shifting or a flicker of moon-shade—but it set her heart beating faster. As the silence deepened, her imagination began to conjure shapes in the dark: a lone tall stone by the wayside looked for an instant like a standing figure, cloaked and still. Daisy halted, heart pounding **wildly**, and stared hard at the object. It was only a mossy monolith half sunk in earth, crowned with a tuft of weeds. She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, feeling both foolish and relieved. "Jumping

at shadows and rocks, now, are we?" she murmured, shaking her head. Her whisper wavered slightly in her own ears.

Just then, a long **hoot** echoed through the wood: *Hoo-hoo!* The cry of an owl rang out from somewhere high in the oak branches above. Daisy nearly jumped out of her skin. She gave a small yelp and swung around toward the sound, raising her lantern. In its flicker she caught the pale ghost of the owl's wings as it departed one tree and glided to another, indignant at her intrusion. The night fell silent again, but Daisy's heart was pattering as swiftly as a frightened hare. She pressed a hand to her chest and closed her eyes. "It was only an owl… only an owl," she whispered, exhaling shakily. A nervous laugh bubbled up at how badly she had been startled. For a moment the notion crossed her mind that the owl's call had sounded like *"Go home!"*—just as in an old rhyme her mother used to sing. Daisy couldn't help a quiet chuckle at that thought. Perhaps now was as good a time as any to recall the comforting nonsense of childhood. Clearing her throat softly, she began to **recite under her breath**:

"There once was a hobbit too bold for his britches,
Who wandered at night and got caught in dark ditches.
'Go home!' hooted owl from an oak tree so tall,
So homeward he scampered at that loud, stern call."

She whispered the little rhyme in a sing-song cadence, imagining for a moment a snug hobbit hole with a warm hearth—much warmer than these chilly woods. The familiar silliness of the verse made her smile, banishing some of the lingering dread. "Well, I'm not about to go scampering home just yet," Daisy muttered after finishing the rhyme. "Not after coming all this way." Saying it aloud strengthened her resolve. She adjusted the strap of her pack on her shoulder and carried on, feeling a touch more *herself*. The quiet of the forest returned, but it now felt a little less oppressive with the company of her own voice lingering in the air.

As she climbed further, the great oaks began to thin. The slope grew steeper and more rocky underfoot. Between the trunks ahead, Daisy saw **open sky** and stars glinting. Her heart quickened—she must be nearing the hill's summit or some break in the trees. Indeed, after a few more strides, she emerged from the dense wood onto a small stony ledge where the trees fell back. Here the path (if it could still be called that) looped around a shoulder of the hill. Daisy caught her breath at the sight that greeted her eyes. Above the dark outline of treetops ahead rose a **pale shape** gleaming in the moonlight: the *ruin of Elostirion's tower*. It thrust up from the crest of the hill, a slender spike of white in the night, crowned not with a roof or beacon but broken jaggedly against the sky. The moon, now risen high, cast its light full upon the ancient stone, and the tower remnant glowed as if with its own radiance. For a long moment Daisy simply stood and **gazed**, one hand resting against an oak trunk for support. A wave of emotion swelled within her—joy and awe mixed with a poignant ache. All the tales and legends she had cherished were suddenly real: *there* stood an Elf-tower of the West, seen with her own hobbit eyes.

"It's real," she whispered. "I'm here… I've done it." A tear of astonished relief gathered at the corner of her eye. Daisy felt at that instant that all her lonely miles of walking, all her hesitations and hopes, had led her to this very point. Far beyond the Shire, beneath strange stars, she was beholding something wondrous that few if any of her kind had ever seen. The white tower of Elostirion, even in ruin, was more beautiful than she had imagined: ancient, sorrowful, and grand. High above, the broken **arches** near its summit framed a handful of stars twinkling beyond. The sight put Daisy in mind of an old rhyme Bilbo Baggins used to recite about **Gil-galad**, an Elven-king of old who had built towers by the Sea. She could not recall the

words now, but a whisper of their cadence tugged at her memory. *This is a place of the Elder Days,* she thought with reverence. *The Elves stood here, long ago. Bilbo himself must have seen these towers from afar on his journey to the Grey Havens… and now here I stand, little Daisy Brockhouse, at their very feet.*

Her lantern seemed suddenly very bright and intrusive in this hushed, sacred glade. Daisy quickly shuttered it, snuffing the light. The moon was bright enough to see by, and she felt it best not to announce her presence with a dancing flame. A prickle of caution crept over her—she realized she truly did not know what (or *who*) she might find upon reaching the tower. Perhaps no one at all; the place looked utterly lifeless. But still… *better to be safe,* she thought. Holding her breath, she listened. Only the sigh of the night breeze in the high branches could be heard, and the distant call of that same owl, now far behind her. Satisfied that no creature stirred nearby, Daisy stepped forward again, moving from the tree line toward the ruins ahead.

The last hundred yards or so were a gentle climb over broken ground. Fragments of white stone lay scattered among the coarse grass and heather. Daisy realized these must be fallen pieces of walls or columns, long tumbled and left where they crashed. One large block by the wayside bore a graceful curved pattern, half worn away—perhaps part of a doorway or carved pillar. She skirted around it, unwilling to disturb anything. Soon the **full clearing** opened before her: the hill's broad top where Elostirion had stood in its glory. Under the moon it was a scene of quiet desolation and haunting beauty.

Daisy found herself at what had once been the courtyard of the tower. The ground here was more level, paved in ages past with stone flags. Many of these had cracked or tilted over years of frost and tree-root heave. In places, young grasses grew up between them, silver-green in the moonlight. To her left and right, a few low **sections of wall** still stood, knee-high or waist-high remnants of structures that once encircled the tower's base. They were draped in curtains of ivy and pale night-flowers. Directly before her rose the **tower itself** — or what remained of it. The base of the tower was intact: a round foundation of white stone, perhaps fifty feet across, out of which soared a tall **spire**. The tower's height surprised Daisy; even ruined it was impressive, reaching maybe forty feet or more into the sky. The top of it had broken off long ago, and jagged stones silhouetted against the stars marked where proud battlements or a roof had been. At the foot of the tower, rubble lay in mounds—chunks of marble and beams of old wood, all covered in moss. An overwhelming sense of *age* and *melancholy* hung over the place, but not a feeling of evil. Rather, Daisy felt as if she had stepped into a **sleeping memory**, a place kept in remembrance by the stones themselves. Her own breathing sounded loud to her ears as she approached the tower's white base.

At the outer edge of the tower foundation, a portion of a great archway still stood upright, half of it fallen away. It must have been the main door into the tower long ago. The archway's curve rose about twice her height, and along its remaining **frieze** she could discern faint markings. Daisy drew nearer, eyes straining. Yes—along the smooth surface were **letters** and curving designs carved in relief. The script was elegant and flowing, unlike the plain runes she had learned at market for tallying bushels. Though Daisy could not read these letters, she knew at once they must be *Elvish writing*. Her heart gave a thrill to see it, even if its meaning was hidden. Gently she set down her dark lantern and reached out a hand to feel the carved letters. The stone was cold under her small fingers, but the chiselled grooves fit her touch perfectly, as if inviting her to trace the shapes. She wondered what ancient blessing or lore was inscribed here. **Reverence** washed over her, and she felt tears prickling again—not of fear now, but of deep, unexpected sorrow mingled with joy. Sorrow that such beauty had fallen into ruin, joy that she at least could witness what remained.

Daisy's whisper broke the silence: "*Elves built those towers with the Men of Westernesse…*" These words came unbidden to her lips, an echo of something Bilbo had told her as a child. She remembered him smoking his pipe by the fireside in Hobbiton, speaking of far-away places. *Westernesse*—the very word tasted like legend. "And here I am touching it," she murmured. Speaking aloud was a comfort in that lonely clearing, so Daisy continued, her voice hushed as in a sacred hall. "How tall it must have been once… perhaps tall enough to see the Great Sea, if the tales are true." She let her gaze drift upward along the white tower's flank, following its line toward the broken top. The stars glittered just beyond, as if *peeking in* through the ravaged crown. A fancy came to her that maybe those same stars had often been gazed upon by Elven eyes standing where she stood now. "Do any Elves still come here, I wonder?" Daisy said softly. The thought made her shiver, though she was not sure if it was from hope or fear. What she would give to see even a glimmer of an Elf after all this wandering! And yet, the very idea of meeting one face-to-face seemed suddenly terrifying. She swallowed, her mouth gone dry, and added in a half-chuckle, "Only you here tonight, Daisy." Her whisper faded into the night air.

No sooner had those words left her mouth than a clear voice spoke in answer, low and musical, from the darkness beneath the trees behind her: **"Who walks in the footsteps of the lost, under moonlight tonight?"**

Daisy whirled around with a gasp, her hand knocking against her lantern where it sat. The voice—certainly no hobbit's voice—echoed softly among the stones. It was as if the very wood had given speech to the night. Her skin prickled with fear and astonishment. For an instant, she could not locate the speaker; the clearing was a mosaic of moonlight and shadow, and her eyes had been fixed on the tower's glow. She squinted toward the line of oaks at the clearing's edge. There, under the dark boughs, a **tall figure** now moved, stepping forward into the silver light.

Out of the shadows **stepped a man-like form**, taller than any Man she had met and certainly towering over a hobbit. He was clad in a flowing cloak of grey that blended with the dusk, and for a heartbeat Daisy thought she beheld one of the great kings of old. The figure's hood was thrown back, revealing long hair that shimmered like **pale gold** in the moon's rays, and a fair face calm and keen. Starlight seemed to glint in his eyes, which were turned on her with an unreadable expression—wise and gentle, yet piercing. Daisy's heart leapt into her throat. *An Elf!* her mind cried. *A real Elf, standing here!* Wonder and fear rooted her to the spot. It felt as though the night itself had taken shape before her.

The tall Elf raised his empty hands slowly, a gesture of peace. In the crook of one arm he carried a slender harp, and at his belt a long sword gleamed faintly—but he made no move to draw it. "Do not be afraid," he said, and his voice was soft now, though it still held the music of far places. He regarded the wide-eyed hobbit with a kindly tilt of his head. "I ask your pardon if I startled you. I heard your voice on the air and wondered what small traveler wandered under these oaks." He took another step forward, the moonlight falling unshadowed across him. Now Daisy could see clearly his noble, ageless face, and the brightness of his eyes made her think of a star shining through a calm evening sky. Despite her trembling, she could not tear her gaze away. Never had she seen or imagined such a figure—he seemed to her as fine and perilous as a polished blade, and yet the smile that ghosted at the corners of his mouth was kind.

"Who are you, child, and what brings you so far from the dwellings of your folk at this late hour?" the Elf asked gently. He spoke the Common Tongue, yet his accent was unlike any she had heard, giving a melody to the simple words.

Daisy opened her mouth but no sound came at first. Her cheeks flushed with both embarrassment and amazement as she realized she must appear terribly rude, gaping at him in silence. She swallowed hard, willing her voice to work. “I… my name is Daisy,” she managed in a faint squeak. Clearing her throat, she tried again, steadier this time: “Daisy Brockhouse of the Shire, sir.”

At the word *Shire*, the Elf’s eyebrows lifted a little in surprise and—was that delight? Daisy could not be sure. Encouraged by his patient gaze, she continued in a rush, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to trespass or— or disturb anything. I only wanted to see the tower. I’ve come such a long way….” She trailed off, suddenly conscious of how foolish her adventure might sound to one of the Fair Folk. What would an Elf think of a hobbit lass wandering alone to find an old tower?

For a moment, the Elf simply looked at her, and in his eyes there was a glimmer like distant laughter, though not unkind. Then he bowed his head slightly. “Well met, Daisy Brockhouse of the Shire,” he said. “You are not trespassing. These woods and hills are free for all who come in peace.” His gaze drifted toward the ruined tower behind her. “Elostirion has had no Warden for many a year… and few visitors indeed, until tonight.”

Daisy felt some of the tightness in her chest ease at his courteous words. Finding her courage, she offered a polite bow in return, as best as a hobbit could. “And well met, sir,” she replied, amazed at herself for carrying on a conversation at all. “If I may ask… are you— I mean, you *are* one of the Elven-folk, are you not?”

A gentle laugh came from the Elf, like a soft breeze through tinkling leaves. “Yes, I am,” he said with a smile. “I am Aerandir of Lindon.” The moonlight caught the Elf’s face as he spoke his name, and Daisy noticed a hint of sadness at the edges of his smile, though his eyes remained bright. Aerandir placed a hand lightly over his heart and inclined his head in a graceful gesture of greeting. “You have come far beyond the borders of your Shire, Daisy. Few of your people venture here now. Tell me, what drew you on this long road under the stars?”

Daisy’s mind spun. Aerandir… Lindon… The names rang in her memory: Lindon was the Elven land beyond the Blue Mountains, by the Sea. Could it be that Aerandir had come from the havens where the Elves’ ships sailed? She realized he was waiting for her answer. “It was the towers, sir—Mister Aerandir,” she said, stumbling slightly over the honorific. “Ever since I heard tales of the Elf-towers, I wanted to see them with my own eyes.” Her voice gained strength as she spoke of her purpose. “I have always loved tales of Elves and old kingdoms. My cousin Bilbo used to tell us children about the White Towers on the Tower Hills, how they gleamed in the distance. I suppose… I suppose I wanted to know if it was all true. So here I am.” She gave a nervous little laugh. “It sounds quite silly when I say it aloud.”

Aerandir shook his head, silver-gold hair shimmering about his shoulders. “Not silly at all,” he said. “Truth and beauty are worth seeking, even by the small and humble. You remind me of someone… Bilbo, did you say? Bilbo Baggins?” At this, Daisy nodded eagerly. “I knew of him,” the Elf went on. “A remarkable hobbit. You are kin to Bilbo then—no wonder the flame of curiosity burns in you.” His eyes twinkled again, and Daisy felt warmth spread in her chest to hear Bilbo praised by an Elf.

She ventured a step closer, leaving the archway’s side, and the two of them now stood only a few paces apart in the clearing. Daisy had to tilt her head back to look at Aerandir’s face. She realized with a start that though he seemed youthful and strong, there was an air of incredible age about him—as if he had seen

many lives of the sun and moon. It was there in the depths of his eyes, an ancient light. Yet here he was, conversing gently with her as if nothing were more natural on this night.

“I’m very pleased to meet you, sir,” Daisy said with genuine fervor. “I never dreamed I actually would meet an Elf—truly I didn’t! Folks at home would never believe it.” She paused, remembering her manners. “Thank you for not minding my being here. I was afraid… well, I wasn’t sure if this place was allowed.” She glanced around at the ruins and old oaks, still half-expecting an unseen guardian to emerge from the stones themselves.

Aerandir regarded the broken tower, and a shadow of melancholy passed over his fair face. “Allowed? Alas, the Elves keep no patrols here now. Elostirion stands lonely, watching over memories.” He sighed softly, then turned back to her with a smile. “But I am glad of your company tonight. It has been long since I spoke with one of the Shire-folk.” His eyes crinkled with quiet mirth. “We do not often find hobbits wandering *beyond the far downs*, as you have.”

Daisy blushed, but she grinned at his phrasing—for beyond the Far Downs indeed she was. “I suppose it isn’t common,” she admitted. “Most hobbits I know seldom leave their own village, let alone the Shire. I might never have, either, if not for…” She trailed off, thinking of the restlessness that had seized her ever since Bilbo’s tales and that clear September day when she had gazed beyond her garden hedge to the unknown west. “If not for a bit of Tookishness, as Bilbo would say.”

At that, Aerandir laughed lightly, a sound so joyful that the very night seemed to gleam brighter. Daisy found herself laughing too, the tension of fear finally melting into genuine delight. Here she stood under the oaks of Elostirion, chatting with an Elf by moonlight—no hobbit’s dream had ever been so wondrous or strange.

For a while, neither of them spoke, and in the quiet Daisy became aware of the world again: the soft glow of the moon, the silhouettes of the tower’s stones around them, and the gentle night noises. The earlier unease had vanished, replaced by a profound peace. The owl hooted once more from afar, but this time Daisy did not jump; she merely smiled.

Aerandir looked up at the stars through the broken arches of the tower. “A fair evening,” he murmured as if to himself. “Gil-Estel shines bright.” Daisy followed his gaze and noticed one star in particular gleaming like a white lamp above the western horizon. She did not know it by the Elvish name he used, but it was the same star she had marveled at earlier in her journey, brightening the twilight: the Evening Star.

“Gil-Estel,” she repeated softly, tasting the Elvish word. “Does that mean the star of Eärendil?” She remembered Bilbo’s translations of old songs that spoke of Eärendil, the mariner who sailed with a Silmaril on his brow and became a star. Her voice trembled slightly on the name, hoping she did not presume too much to ask.

Aerandir’s eyes lit with pleasure. “You know of Eärendil?” he said. “Yes, Gil-Estel is what we name the light of his star. It means ‘Star of Hope.’” He regarded Daisy with new interest. “Many are the songs about Eärendil. Did Bilbo teach you that?”

Daisy nodded. “A little. He loved songs and lore. I only remember snatches, though.” She felt suddenly shy, recalling a fragment of a verse: *Eärendil was a mariner, who tarried in Arvernien…* She decided not to attempt singing it in front of an actual Elf, fearing she’d get it wrong.

Aerandir seemed to sense her bashfulness and smiled encouragingly. “Bilbo’s knowledge ran deep. It gladdens me that he passed some to his young kin.” He paused and then gestured with a slender hand toward the base of the tower. “Come, Daisy. You have traveled far to see these ruins—let me show you something that might please you.”

He led her a short distance along the curve of the tower’s foundation, to where a wide marble step lay cracked in two. Daisy realized this had been the **threshold** of the tower’s great door. Aerandir stepped over it lightly and guided her into what once was the tower’s interior. Now it was open to the sky: a round space strewn with rubble and edged by the remaining half-walls. In the center, a few **columns** still stood, reaching about twice Daisy’s height before ending abruptly. One of these columns leaned at a slight angle and bore carvings of leaves and stars upon it.

As Daisy’s eyes roamed wonderingly, Aerandir moved to a flat stone at the foot of that leaning column. With a courteous gesture, he invited Daisy to look. By the moon’s glow she saw that this stone was smoother than the rest, as if it had once been polished or set apart. Etched into its surface were more of those flowing Elven letters. They were arranged in an artful line, and at one end was carved a symbol like a seven-pointed star.

“It is **Tengwar** script—our writing,” Aerandir explained softly, noting her curiosity. He knelt gracefully and traced the first few characters with a long, elegant finger. “These lines are a farewell in the High Elven tongue. They were carved here many centuries ago, after the last Elven king of Lindon left these shores.” His voice grew quiet, as if he spoke of something very dear and distant.

Daisy knelt beside him, hardly daring to breathe. “What… what does it say?” she asked in a whisper.

Aerandir glanced at her, and the gentleness in his face was mingled with sorrow. “It says: *Elbereth guide us, Elendil guard us; afar we remember, here we depart.*” He spoke the translation slowly, and Daisy felt a chill and a warmth at once—chill at the sadness in those words, warmth at their beauty. Though she did not fully understand all they meant, they stirred her heart strangely.

“Elendil… he was a great King of Men, wasn’t he? The one who built these towers with Gil-galad?” Daisy ventured, recalling what bits of lore she knew.

Aerandir smiled. “Yes, Elendil the Tall. He stood here once, gazing out to sea, they say. This tower held one of the **palantíri**, the seeing-stones, which he used to look West over the waves toward his lost home.” The Elf’s voice was melodic and low, and Daisy found herself hanging on every word. It was as if the very stones under her feet were coming to life with the old tales. “When Elendil fell in war and Gil-galad with him, the stone remained here, kept by our people through long years. But at last, it was taken over Sea.” Aerandir’s eyes were far away as he spoke, and Daisy sensed deep longing in him.

She dared not interrupt. Only after a respectful pause did she say softly, “Over the Sea… to the Undying Lands?”

Aerandir inclined his head. “Yes. To Elvenhome. Many of my kin have now sailed, carrying with them relics of the past—the stone of Elostirion among them.” He brushed his fingertips lightly across the carved inscription, and then stood, helping Daisy up as well. “Yet echoes remain.” He raised his face to the sky once more. “The star of Eärendil still rises nightly, hope yet shines. And here stand these white stones, holding memory.”

Daisy felt a gentle tug in her chest at his words. She realized suddenly that this Elf, too, would soon depart Middle-earth, just like the palantír and the other Elves of legend. The thought made her unexpectedly sad. Here he was before her now, but for how long? Would this be the only night she ever saw an Elf?

Aerandir turned to her as if reading her thought. “Nothing in Middle-earth lasts forever,” he said quietly, “not even the Eldar.” Then, seeing the glimmer of tears in Daisy’s eyes, he gave a comforting smile. “But come, this is no hour for sadness. We have met under the oaks of Elostirion on a fair night. That is a thing to celebrate, is it not?”

Daisy blinked and managed a smile, wiping her eyes quickly with her sleeve. “Yes,” she agreed, her voice hushed. “I… I’m very glad you’re here, Aerandir. I was a bit frightened before, coming up alone.” She let out a breathy laugh. “More than a bit, if I’m honest. I was jumping at shadows.”

The Elf chuckled softly. “You have a brave heart to come at all,” he said. “Frightened or no, you did not turn back. That is not a small thing, Daisy.” He looked thoughtfully at her, as though seeing more than just a simple hobbit lass.

Daisy felt her cheeks warm at the praise. “I don’t know about brave,” she murmured. “Maybe just stubborn.”

Aerandir laughed again, and the sound was like a brief music in the ruin. “Often those two walk together,” he said. With that he stepped away and paced a few steps across the broken floor, his eyes on the stars above. “When I saw your lantern down among the trees, I thought at first my eyes tricked me,” he admitted. “A star dancing in the wood, I thought— or perhaps a mischievous fox carrying a flame!” He gave her a playful glance. “Never did I guess a hobbit had come visiting.”

Daisy giggled at the image of a fox with a lantern in its teeth. “I nearly didn’t bring it,” she said. “I was trying to be **quiet as a mouse**, but it got so dark under the trees, I had to risk a little light. I’m sorry if I disturbed your… your vigil, or whatever it was.”

Aerandir shook his head, his expression turning reassuring. “No disturbance. In truth, I often walk abroad here at night, alone with my thoughts. I am glad for company.” He motioned toward one of the half-walls where a few flat stones provided a convenient seat. “Shall we rest a while? You must be weary after your road.”

Only now that he mentioned it did Daisy notice how sore her feet were and how heavy her legs felt. The day’s journey, the excitement, and the climb had taken more of a toll than she realized in the moment of meeting Aerandir. “Thank you, yes,” she said gratefully, moving to sit where he indicated. She lowered herself onto the cool stone remains of the wall, stretching her tired feet. Aerandir settled nearby, resting on a fallen column drum opposite her, setting down his small harp carefully at his side.

For a short while they sat in companionable silence. Daisy found herself gazing up at the ruins and the sky beyond. The scene was serene: the moon had begun to drift westward, its light now casting long shadows of the tower's broken columns across the interior. The stars were bright and ancient above the open roof. A gentle night wind stirred, carrying with it the faintest sound—like a distant sigh or perhaps the echo of a song—through the oak boughs around the hilltop. Daisy felt as if the land itself were breathing peacefully.

Aerandir spoke softly, almost musing to himself. "In all my years keeping watch here, I never imagined meeting one of your folk in this place. It is a happy chance." He gave her a gentle smile. "It brings back memories of old friends."

Daisy's ears pricked with curiosity. "Have you known other hobbits, then?" she asked.

The Elf nodded slowly. "I have met a few," he said. "Long ago, I traveled eastward and tarried a while in the woods beyond the Shire. I recall a night, nearly a hundred years past, when I shared a meal and some stories with two wandering hobbits beneath the stars. They were bound for the Eastfarthing, I think, just roaming for the pleasure of it." He chuckled. "Rare souls indeed. And of course, I have heard much of the deeds of certain famous halflings in recent times—Frodo and Samwise, Meriadoc and Peregrin. Their names reached even Lindon."

Daisy beamed with pride. "They're heroes in the Shire, you know," she said eagerly. "There are songs about them now. My cousin Merry—that is Meriadoc—he lives in Buckland, and my family's met him. He doesn't speak much of the wars, but everyone knows he helped slay a great Witch-king!" She flushed, realizing she was prattling, but Aerandir listened with bright interest. "And Captain Frodo," she continued reverently, "we all owe him so much. The Shire would be no safe place if not for what he did… though most folk don't truly understand it, I reckon."

Aerandir bowed his head. "Their courage will not be forgotten by Elves or Men," he said. "Even in far Valinor, their praise is sung, I am told."

Daisy let out a sigh of contentment. How strange, she thought, that she should be discussing such things with an Elf at the very edge of the Shire's maps! If only those at home could see her now. And yet, a part of her was glad this moment was *hers* alone—a secret to treasure.

She realized her eyes were growing heavy; the excitement of the day and the lateness of the hour were catching up to her. She tried to hide a small yawn behind her hand. Aerandir noticed and smiled kindly. "You have had a long day and a longer journey, Daisy," he said. "Rest if you wish. You are safe here."

Daisy blinked, suddenly aware that she truly was utterly exhausted. The adrenaline of meeting Aerandir had carried her this far, but her limbs now felt leaden and her head pleasantly foggy. The stone wall she sat on was cool, but she had a small blanket in her pack and the cloak on her back for warmth. "Maybe just for a little while," she murmured. "I don't want to impose…"

"You impose nothing," Aerandir assured her. "I will keep watch." He looked out toward the west. "Dawn is yet a few hours away. You may sleep and still wake before sunrise, if that is your wish."

Daisy gave a grateful nod. In truth, she hadn't fully planned what she would do upon reaching the tower at night—now she thanked her luck that an Elf himself offered to stand guard. She slid off the wall and spread her wool blanket on a patch of ground sheltered by the low ruins, where some dry leaves had collected. With her pack for a pillow, she wrapped her cloak around her shoulders and settled down. The stone ruins at her back radiated a faint stored warmth from the day's sun, keeping off the worst of the chill.

Aerandir remained seated nearby, humming softly as he tuned the strings of his harp. The melody he picked was soft and soothing, blending with the whisper of the breeze. Daisy watched him through half-lidded eyes. His face was tipped upward, silvery hair falling back over his shoulders, and his lips moved as if forming quiet words to the music—perhaps an Elven lullaby. A sense of perfect peace stole over Daisy then. The fears and uncertainties that had plagued her earlier were gone, replaced by a safe, drowsy wonder. Here under the oaks of Elostirion, beneath star and shadow, she had found more than she ever hoped: *a friend*.

Her last waking thought as her eyes closed was that the moonlight filtering through the oak leaves looked just like **bits of mithril** scattered in the air. She felt as though she were inside a gentle dream. The soft music of Aerandir's harp followed her into sleep, and the wind in the high branches murmured as if in agreement that this night was indeed one for marvels.

Thus Daisy Brockhouse fell asleep in the ruins of the Elf-tower, under the watchful eyes of an Elf lord, with starlight on her face and a quiet smile upon her lips. The ancient hill was silent save for the faint notes of Elven song that kept the darkness at bay. And in that stillness, one could almost imagine that the stones and trees themselves listened, remembering days long gone and cherishing this new memory — a small hobbit and a far-wandering Elf, meeting by chance and sharing stories **under the oaks of Elostirion**.

ChatGPT

Chapter Six: The Lore of Elostirion

Daisy woke in the hush before dawn, nestled amid the tumbled stones of the old tower. For a moment she blinked in confusion at the unfamiliar expanse of stars overhead. The air was cool and smelled of dew on grass and ancient stone. Remembering where she was, she drew her shawl tighter around her shoulders. She was still on the lonely hill of Elostirion, far beyond the Shire, and the events of the night came back to her like a half-remembered dream.

Nearby, Aerandir stood watchful and silent. The Elf was perched lightly on a broken pillar, face upturned to the heavens. Starlight glimmered in his grey eyes and in the strands of his silver hair. He seemed deep in contemplation, as if listening to distant music on the breeze. Daisy realized he must have kept vigil through the night while she slept. She sat up gingerly, cheeks warming with embarrassment. “Oh—good morning,” she whispered softly, unsure if dawn had officially come, or whether one even greeted an Elf with *good morning* at such an hour.

Aerandir turned and smiled, dipping his head in greeting. “Good morning, Daisy,” he replied in a low, melodious voice. “Or good evening still—for the stars have not yet faded.” Indeed, the sky remained a deep indigo vault freckled with countless stars; only far in the east did a faint hint of pearly grey signal that dawn approached. “You have slept a little. I trust you found some rest?” he asked kindly.

“I did, thank you. I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to fall asleep,” Daisy answered, brushing stray grass from her skirts as she rose to her feet. She was relieved to find she had only nodded off for a short while. “I hope I didn’t inconvenience you.”

Aerandir shook his head, still gazing gently at her. “Not in the least. The night is swift to an Elf. We do not weary of keeping watch under the stars—especially not here in Elostirion.” He stepped down from the pillar with effortless grace. “Besides, it was fitting that you should dream awhile in this place. Elostirion has seen many gentle dreams and solemn vigils over the long years.”

Daisy followed his gaze around the ruin. In the dim starlight she could make out the crumbling white masonry and the stump of the tower that once rose high above. The silence was profound save for a light stir of wind through the oak trees below. A feeling of ancient memory clung to the broken walls. Daisy realized her earlier fear had vanished, replaced by quiet wonder. Here she was, in the heart of an Elf-tower long lost to legend, with an Elf of the Havens for company. She had so many questions swirling in her mind, yet she hesitated to disturb the hush.

Aerandir seemed to sense her curiosity. He gave a slight, reassuring smile. “Ask what you will,” he said quietly. “The hours before dawn are still ours, and I perceive you are wondering about this place.”

Daisy nodded, grateful for his insight. She drew a little nearer to where the Elf stood beneath the shattered archway of the tower. “If it’s not rude to ask… I’d love to know more about this tower,” she began. Her voice was hushed; it felt only right to speak softly here. “I’ve heard so many tales, but I never knew what it was truly for, or who built it. You called it Elostirion. What happened here, long ago?”

Aerandir trailed his slender fingers along a block of stone at his side, as if feeling the years etched into it. “Elostirion,” he repeated softly. “In my tongue that means the Dream-tower.” His eyes grew distant with memory. “It was raised many ages ago,” he went on, “built by my kin in alliance with the Men of Westernesse—with King Elendil himself—after he fled the Downfall of Númenor. In those days, Elves and the Men of the West labored together as friends. They set three tall towers upon these hills, as a symbol of that alliance and as a watch upon the western seas.”

Daisy listened intently, picturing it in her mind: three shining white towers crowned with pennants, standing guard over the sunset. “Elendil…,” she murmured, recognizing the name from her grandfather’s tales of ancient kings. “He was a friend of the Elves, wasn’t he? And Westernesse—that means Númenor, the lost island.”

Aerandir nodded, pleased at her knowledge. “Yes. Elendil was a great lord of Men who escaped the drowning of Númenor. He and the Elven-king Gil-galad stood together against the Shadow in those days. As a token of friendship, Gil-galad had these towers built *for* Elendil upon the western rim of his new kingdom. And in the tallest tower—this one, Elostirion—they placed a remarkable gift.”

Daisy’s eyes followed Aerandir’s gesture as he pointed toward the center of the ruin. There, half-buried in weeds, was the base of a broken column or pedestal. “A gift?” she prompted, stepping closer.

Aerandir laid his hand on the weathered pedestal, his fingers tracing its edge. “A *palantír*,” he said. Seeing Daisy’s puzzled face, he smiled and added, “In the Common Tongue we would call it a *Seeing-stone*. It was a globe of crystal, set here long ago to gaze over the wide Sea.”

“A seeing-stone… to gaze over the Sea?” Daisy repeated slowly. She pictured a great crystal ball sitting atop that plinth, filled with enchantment. The idea sent a shiver of awe through her. “Could it truly see things far away? Across the ocean itself?”

Aerandir looked westward, where night still lingered beyond the hill. “Yes. Unlike a simple mirror that shows only reflections nearby, this stone was bound with ancient power. One who knew its craft could cast their sight over leagues of water and land. In days of old, Elendil would often climb this hill and peer into it, seeking a far green country under a swift sunrise—the land of the Uttermost West from which we Eldar came, and to which we yearn to return.” His voice grew quiet and wistful. “Through that palantír, it’s said one could behold the shining city of Avallónë across the water, where a great Elf-tower mirrors this one on the Lonely Isle.”

A tremor ran through Daisy’s heart at his words. She could almost see it in her mind’s eye: the Straight Road running beyond the world’s curve to an undying shore, aglow with the first light of dawn. How wondrous that an ancient king had stood on this very spot and glimpsed such marvels! “It sounds beautiful,” she whispered. “Truly beautiful… I wish I could see it, even once.” She sighed, a little sadly. “But I suppose folk like me aren’t meant to, are we?”

Aerandir turned to her, and the sympathy in his face was plain. “In each age of the world, some bright things are kept from the younger folks,” he said gently. “We Elves have our memories of the West, but your people have different gifts. Hobbits have a way of finding joy in the simple and the ordinary, seeing beauty in what is at hand. That is no small gift, I deem.”

Daisy blushed, but she smiled. “I suppose we do, at that.” She thought of her cozy kitchen at home, of sunrise over the Shire’s green hills, and for a moment the ache of longing eased. “I’ve always loved our little things—gardens, tea by the hearth, and stories on the doorstep at twilight.” She glanced up shyly. “Still, I’m glad I stepped out to see something *bigger* this time. Even if I can’t look into any far-seeing stone, finding this place and meeting you… it’s more than I ever dreamed.”

Aerandir laughed softly, a sound like a breeze through chimes. “You have a curious spirit, Daisy Brockhouse, and that is a gift too.” His eyes shone as he regarded the hobbit-lass. “Tell me, what led you here, all alone on such a night? Few of your kindred stray beyond the Downs of the Shire.”

Daisy bit her lip, suddenly aware how small her reasons might sound. “Well,” she began, “to be honest, it started with stories. My gaffer and granddad used to speak of the Elf-towers they’d seen from afar on the horizon. And Mr. Bilbo Baggins—perhaps you’ve heard of him?—he’s a hobbit who had real adventures. He used to tell tales about Elves and even wrote down some of your songs and lore.” She wrung her hands together, feeling a little foolish. “Most folk at home don’t believe a word of it, but I always thought there must be *some* truth. I only meant to go as far as the Downs for a look, but then I just… kept walking. I wanted to see for myself.” She gave a small, apologetic shrug. “It sounds silly now, but I walked all afternoon and evening, and here I am.”

Aerandir’s face lit with quiet amusement. “Not silly at all. You followed wonder rather than fear, and that is a rare thing.” He nodded, as if approving her secret journey. “Bilbo Baggins, say you? I have indeed heard that name. There are songs about his exploits even in the halls of the Elven-king far away—though I confess I never expected to meet one of his kin out here.” He gave Daisy a playful bow. “Your courage does your famous cousin credit.”

Daisy laughed lightly, feeling more at ease. “Oh my, Bilbo would be tickled to hear that. I’m only a very distant relation of his, and not half so brave, I’m sure.” She paused, tilting her head at Aerandir. “You really have traveled far, haven’t you? You speak as if you’ve been to many places—even the Elven-king’s halls. Are you a wandering Elf, then?”

The Elf shook his head, smiling. “Not always wandering. In truth, my home is by the Sea—at the Grey Havens (which we call *Mithlond*) beyond these very hills.” He gestured vaguely westward beyond the darkness of the downs. “I am one of the mariners who tend the white ships that lie anchored in the Havens, ships that will carry my people back over the water. But now and again I journey inland or along the coasts. I have seen many harbors and shores in my time.” He fell silent for a moment, his gaze turning inward. “I have sailed south to lands of sun and desert, and north to fjords of ice. I ventured eastward, farther than most of my kin, in years long past. Yet—” a gentle sigh escaped him, “yet no land I have seen is as fair as that which lies in the uttermost West, under the light of the Evening Star above the Undying Lands.”

At those words, Daisy’s face brightened with recognition. “The Evening Star… do you mean the star called Eärendil?” she asked eagerly. She stepped closer, her weariness forgotten. “I know a little tale about that! Bilbo – the same Bilbo Baggins – he translated an old Elvish song all about Eärendil the Mariner, riding the sky with a jewel on his brow.” She flushed, realizing she might be blurting lore to an actual Elf. “I only remember bits of it, but it spoke of a shining ship and a precious star-jewel. I used to love hearing it.”

Aerandir’s eyebrows raised in surprise and delight. “You know of Eärendil?” he said. A soft laugh followed. “Your Mr. Bilbo must be a remarkable hobbit indeed, to teach such a song in the Shire.”

“He was,” Daisy agreed, her eyes shining at the memory. “I wish I could remember more of the poem for you.” She furrowed her brow, trying to recall it. “It began something like, *‘Eärendil was a mariner, who tarried in… in Arvernien,’* and later there was a line about a Silmaril on his brow… oh, and his ship was named Vingilótë, I think.” She laughed apologetically. “I’m afraid I’ve muddled the verses. I mostly remember how it made me feel—full of wonder, as if the sky itself were an ocean full of stories.”

Aerandir’s eyes gleamed. “Those are noble names and words to come from a hobbit’s lips,” he said. He gazed upward thoughtfully, and Daisy saw a new tenderness soften his face. “Eärendil is very dear to us. Long ago, he was a great hero – a mortal man who carried Elven blood – and he sailed across the vast seas of heaven to beg the mercy of the Powers for both Elves and Men. The Silmaril he bore upon his brow was the brightest jewel of the ancient world, filled with the light of a holy star. Because of his courage and sacrifice, hope was rekindled.” Aerandir pointed toward a brilliant point of light now twinkling above the paling horizon. “And there he is, even now. The Valar set his ship, Vingilot, to sail the skies forever, and Eärendil shines as that very star—the Evening Star (and also the Morning Star, for those who wake early enough).”

Daisy followed his gesture and caught her breath. In the deep blue pre-dawn sky, one white star shone with exceptional brightness above the world’s edge. She had seen that star on many evenings at home, never guessing it was anything more than a wandering light of the heavens. Now she knew its secret. “Eärendil,” she whispered, letting the name roll reverently off her tongue. The star seemed to flare in answer, casting a slender beam of silver down on the western tower-hill.

Seeing her wonder, Aerandir’s face grew luminous with an inner joy. In that moment he did not seem sorrowful or remote at all, but young and glad. “You have a noble heart to value these tales,” he said softly. “Many mortals nowadays remember so little of them.”

They stood together in the broken court of Elostirion, hobbit and Elf gazing up at the star of Eärendil as the night around them grew ever more still. At length, Aerandir spoke again, almost in a whisper. “We have a song about that star, and about Elbereth, the Kindler of the Stars. It is very old, but we still sing it when our hearts are stirred by memory.” He glanced down at Daisy. “Would you like to hear it?”

Daisy looked up at him, eyes wide and eager. “Oh, yes,” she breathed. “Please.”

Aerandir inclined his head. Stepping upon a low fallen stone, he faced westward as if addressing the fading night. Then, in a voice clear and low, he began to sing:

> **A Elbereth Gilthoniel!**
> **White are the stars in the splendor of night.**
> **We still remember, we who remain,**
> **thy starlight on the Western main.**

The melody that bore those words was soft and haunting. It drifted through the ruin like a tender breeze. Daisy did not understand the language, but the very sound of it moved her to the core. She felt as if the stars themselves were listening. The great oaks on the slope below had gone utterly still. Even the air seemed to shimmer with the echo of distant light. As Aerandir sang, the single bright star of Eärendil glowed brighter, as though it, too, were answering the ancient hymn.

Daisy's throat tightened and tears gathered in her eyes. She could not have said why—the song was sweet, but filled with longing that pierced her heart. For a moment, it felt as if the veil between Middle-earth and that far green land in the West grew thin, and in that moment she almost glimpsed the reflection of immortal shores. She stood enraptured, hardly daring to breathe until the last clear note faded into silence.

Aerandir's voice trailed off gently. The final word lingered in the air, then quieted. Daisy realized she had been holding her breath; she let it out in a quivering sigh. A single tear spilled down her cheek.

"That… that was the most beautiful thing I've ever heard," she said softly. Her voice trembled with emotion. She hastily wiped her cheek with her sleeve, embarrassed by her tears, but Aerandir simply gave her a warm, understanding smile.

"I am glad it found favor with you," he replied. "Our songs always find a welcome in open hearts." He placed a hand lightly over his breast in an elegant gesture of gratitude. "And I am glad, truly, to have sung it for one who listens so kindly. You have given *me* a gift tonight, Daisy — the gift of sharing an old joy with a new friend."

Friend. Daisy beamed at the word, feeling a warm glow blossom inside her. Only yesterday she had thought of Elves as distant, ethereal folk of legend — and now here she was, sharing songs under the stars with Aerandir, who called her friend.

The first pale hint of dawn was now touching the sky, a silver-grey light seeping up behind the distant trees. Aerandir glanced east where morning approached, then back to Daisy. An affectionate gleam sparkled in his eye. "Now," he said, a note of playful curiosity in his voice, "it strikes me that I have not yet had the pleasure of hearing a hobbit song."

Daisy blinked, caught off guard. "A… a hobbit song? From me?" She was certain she must have misheard.

"Indeed," laughed Aerandir. "You know so much of our lore. Will you not share one of *your* people's lays with me? A small song to greet the morning, perhaps, as the Shire-folk would sing it?"

Daisy stared at him, equal parts delighted and terrified. She had never imagined that an Elf would earnestly ask to hear one of her simple Shire tunes. Her heart fluttered like a bird caught between longing and fear, and for a moment she found herself quite at a loss for words.

ChatGPT

Chapter Seven: Songs in the Night

Daisy sat perched on a low, tumbled stone beneath the broken arch of the ancient tower, twisting the hem of her cloak between nervous fingers. Aerandir's gentle request still echoed in her ears—he had asked if she might share a Hobbit song to lighten the darkness. Now an expectant hush fell between them. The night air was cool and clear, filled with the faint whisper of wind through the oak grove that encircled the ruins. High above, a few timid stars peeped through the ragged clouds. Daisy's heart fluttered like a small bird; she had never sung in front of anyone but her own kin, let alone an Elf. For a long moment, she only listened to the breeze and the soft creak of distant branches, gathering her courage.

Finally, Daisy drew a slow breath. "I—I do know one song," she ventured quietly, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's nothing grand, just a little lullaby my mother used to sing to me and my brothers. But if you wish… I could sing that." She glanced up at Aerandir shyly. The Elf's silver-grey eyes met hers with patient kindness. He inclined his head gently, a quiet encouragement shining in his gaze.

With a small nod, Daisy clasped her hands together to keep them from trembling. She fixed her thoughts on home—on the warm, round windows of her family's burrow, and the sound of her mother's voice humming this very tune by the fireside. The memory steadied her. In a soft, quavering voice she began to sing the simple Shire lullaby:

> O little star above the hill,
> shining gently, shining still,
> guide my weary feet at night
> and keep me in your kindly light.
> Let the wind blow soft and true,
> carry me on home to you,
> send me dreams sweet and bright
> and watch me till the morning light.

The tender melody drifted into the darkness. At first Daisy's voice wavered on each note, as shy and fluttering as a wren's. But as she continued, her tone grew steadier and warm. She imagined she was singing her younger siblings to sleep back in their snug beds, and the thought lent strength to her voice. The ancient stones of Elostirion's ruin caught the little song and echoed it back in faint whispers, as if the tower itself were listening. Aerandir stood unmoving beneath the arch, his fair head bowed slightly, the silver glow of his star-glass illuminating his noble profile. A soft radiance seemed to enfold the clearing: the mingled light of moon and starlight on mossy white stone, and the gentle rise and fall of a hobbit-lullaby welling from the heart.

When the last lilting line faded, Daisy let the final note hang in the air before trailing into silence. She blinked, realizing she had closed her eyes while singing. Now she opened them to find Aerandir regarding her intently. Suddenly self-conscious, Daisy felt heat rising in her cheeks. She fiddled with a loose thread on her cloak and dared a nervous smile. "I— I hope it was all right," she murmured. "It's just a simple tune, nothing like the songs of the Elves…"

For a moment, Aerandir did not speak. Instead, he placed a hand over his heart and bowed his head deeply toward her. In the quiet that followed, Daisy's stomach fluttered—perhaps he was disappointed? But when he looked up, there was a brightness in his eyes like starlight on dew.

"That was a beautiful little song," Aerandir said softly. His voice, usually so musical and calm, sounded touched with emotion. "I feel as though the Shire itself were singing me to rest."

A delicate thrill of joy swept through Daisy at his words. She broke into a broad smile, relief and happiness welling up inside her. A laugh—gentle and merry—bubbled out of her, and Aerandir too laughed quietly, a sound like a distant bell at evening. In that soft laughter, all the lingering tension between them melted away like morning frost under the sun.

"I'm so glad you liked it," Daisy said, ducking her head modestly. "I was afraid you'd find it silly."

"Silly? Not in the least," he assured her. "Your song carries the sweet air of your homeland. It brought comfort to my heart." Aerandir's lips curved in a luminous smile. "There is a grace in Hobbit-songs, a homely wisdom, that one does not often hear in the wide world."

Daisy's cheeks glowed with pride at the praise. Encouraged by Aerandir's genuine delight, she felt her shyness ebb further. The extraordinary truth of the moment settled warmly within her: here she was, a simple Hobbit lass far from home, sharing songs in the night with an Elf beneath the ruins of an old tower. It felt wondrous and yet, somehow, perfectly natural now—as if such friendship were always meant to be.

They began to talk more easily then, their voices low and amiable so as not to disturb the hush of the late hour. Aerandir asked her gently about the Shire, eager to hear more of her people's ways. At first Daisy hesitated, wondering what mundane tales of gardens and pantries could interest someone who had walked beneath the undying stars of Elvenhome. But Aerandir's attentive smile dispelled her doubts. And so, with growing animation, Daisy painted him a picture of life in her faraway Shire.

She told him of the rolling green hills and fertile fields of her home, where harvest time brought abundance and cheer. "We're just finishing the harvest back home," she said, her hazel eyes lighting up at the thought. "There's always a great gathering when all the crops are in. We sing folk songs and dance under the party tree until our feet are sore!" Daisy giggled, remembering last year's merriment. "You should see it—dozens of Hobbits linking arms, dancing reels and stamping their feet. Not the most graceful sight, perhaps, but we have such fun that no one minds."

Aerandir chuckled, and Daisy was delighted to see the Elf's eyes crinkle with genuine mirth. "I can almost picture it," he said. "Music and laughter under the trees—there may be no sight more joyful. Your people truly know how to celebrate the simple wonders of life."

"Oh yes," Daisy nodded eagerly. "Any excuse for a feast or a dance, that's what we say! Birthdays are especially grand affairs in the Shire. We throw parties with mountains of food and plenty of ale, and everyone dances and makes merry." She paused, a mischievous glint coming into her eye. "Why, the biggest party there ever was happened long before I was born—old Mr. Bilbo Baggins's famous birthday party. Have you heard of it?"

Aerandir's brows lifted slightly. "Bilbo Baggins… I have indeed heard that name." A smile played on his lips, as if he recalled a distant tale. "Was he not the Hobbit who had a legendary feast with fireworks that lit up the whole Shire sky?"

"Yes, exactly!" Daisy beamed, delighted that an Elf of the Havens knew of Bilbo's astonishing farewell party. "They say there were fireworks like none before or since—dragons and fountains of green and gold fire, all courtesy of Gandalf the Grey, though I only know of it from older folks' recollections. Bilbo was quite the character; they still tell stories about how he vanished that night in a flash of magic." She gave a little laugh. "It's practically become Shire legend by now. We Hobbits love a good story, after all, especially if it involves a bit of magic and mischief."

Aerandir listened with an expression of amused wonder. "It seems the Shire holds more magic than one might assume," he said. "Though it is a quiet folk-land, it has tales of its own that reach even our ears." He shook his head lightly, as if marveling at the interconnectedness of their worlds. "And what of your own home, Daisy? Do you live in a house among those green hills, or…?"

"Oh no, not a house—at least not the way Big Folk have houses," Daisy answered, eager to describe her beloved home. "I live in a burrow, a smial as we call it, a cozy Hobbit-hole dug into a hillside. It has a round door painted yellow, and windows that look out onto my little garden. Inside, there's a warm kitchen filled with the smell of baked bread, a snug parlor with a hearth for evenings by the fire, and tunnels that run like rabbit-warrens connecting all the rooms. It might sound humble, but to us, it's the cosiest place in the world."

At this, Aerandir's eyes sparkled. "An earth-home beneath the hill… It sounds most charming," he said. "I have not seen the like of it, but I can almost feel the warmth and peace you describe. A round door under the green turf—like something from a gentle dream." He laughed softly. "Though I daresay one of the Big Folk would have to crawl on hands and knees to enter! Your people have made your homes to fit yourselves, snug and round."

Daisy laughed along with him. "Indeed we have! An Elf might bump his head quite badly in our low-ceilinged halls," she said, looking at Aerandir's tall frame. "But you would be most welcome all the same—mind your head and come in for tea, we'd say."

She imagined for a moment an Elf ducking under the beams of her family's burrow and had to suppress a grin. The thought was absurd and yet heart-warming: two worlds truly meeting.

"And you spoke of feasts," Aerandir prompted kindly. "It seems Hobbits are renowned for their appetites as well as their merriment."

"Oh, that we are," Daisy replied, her face brightening with mischief. "Truth be told, we love nothing better than a well-stocked pantry. Why, I remember a comical tale of one of our local farmers—Old Farmer Burrowes. One harvest festival, he boasted he could eat an entire seed-cake baked by my Aunt Primrose, who's famous for her generous portions. Everyone dared him to do it, and, bless me, he did manage to gobble the whole cake!" She put a hand over her mouth, suppressing another giggle. "Of course, he was so full afterwards he couldn't move from his chair for the rest of the evening. His wife fussed over him something awful. We all had a good laugh about it for days."

Aerandir laughed, a rich musical sound that seemed to surprise even himself as it echoed among the ruins. “A whole seed-cake in one sitting! I am impressed by both the courage and the folly,” he said, eyes shining. “Your Farmer Burrowes must have a heart as stout as his stomach. I think I should like Hobbits very much, were I to meet more of them.”

“You would indeed,” Daisy agreed merrily. “There’s not a more welcoming folk in all Middle-earth, if I may say so. Anyone with a good story or a basket of food is greeted as a friend at our table.”

“So I have learned tonight,” Aerandir said warmly, inclining his head to her. “You have given me a glimpse of the Shire’s heart, Daisy. It is a gift I shall not forget.” He paused, and a thoughtful look came over his face. “Now, in return, allow me to share a little of my home with you—such as I can, with mere words.”

Daisy settled herself eagerly, drawing her cloak around her against the slight chill that crept into the midnight air. She had been curious about Aerandir’s homeland ever since he first spoke of watching the Sea. Now she watched him with bright, attentive eyes as he gazed westward, as if seeing beyond the darkness to distant shores.

“I dwell in the Grey Havens, which we call Mithlond,” Aerandir began. His voice was gentle and low, yet filled with a resonant pride when he spoke the name of his home. “It lies beyond these hills, where the River Lhûn flows into the Great Sea. In the Havens, our white ships with swan-shaped prows lie anchored, awaiting their final voyages. By day the harbors shine with sun on bright water, and by dusk they are aglow with soft grey lamps that sway on the quays.”

As he spoke, Daisy could almost see it: a broad harbor under a quiet twilight sky, with stone piers extending into darkling waters. “Grey lamps?” she echoed in wonder.

Aerandir nodded, a distant smile on his face. “Aye. At evening, we kindle lamps of silver glass along the docks. Their light is gentle, guiding the last of our people back from the sea or welcoming any travelers who wander near. The quays and halls of Mithlond are made of grey stone and weathered wood; there is a sweetness of age to that place. Often at sunset, we sing on the shore—a last song to the land we have loved. The sound drifts out over the waves, and the gulls answer our voices with their own cries.”

Daisy listened, enthralled. She could picture slender Elven figures walking by the water’s edge as stars kindled above the sea, their voices mingling with the wind and the seabirds. There was poetry in Aerandir’s every word. As he described the gulls wheeling against a sky of gold and dusk purple, she fancied for a moment that she could hear the distant echo of their keening.

Aerandir’s eyes grew luminous as he continued. “And the Sea itself, Daisy… the Sea is a wonder beyond all. Have you ever been to the ocean’s shore?”

She shook her head slowly. “Never. I’ve only seen drawings in Mr. Bilbo’s old book, and the largest water I know is our Brandywine River—which is just a ribbon, I’m sure, next to your Sea.”

Aerandir smiled gently. “The Sea…” he said, and his gaze grew remote, as if recalling an image from memory that was dear to him. “When the wind blows in from the west, the Great Sea rolls onto the land in waves tall as hills. They break upon the beaches with a sound like thunder turned musical—an endless

rhythm of roar and hush, roar and hush. On pebbled shores the waves create a gentle tumult, like the voice of the world itself speaking in secret." He closed his eyes briefly, and a faint breath of reminiscence escaped him. "There is a scent too—the salt on the air that wakes the spirit, and the taste of sea-spray on your lips. It is a thing at once powerful and peaceful."

Daisy had closed her eyes as well, letting his vivid words wash over her. In her mind she tried to summon the sensation: a great water rushing toward her, the hiss of foam on stones, the strange salty freshness in the air. It was difficult; nothing in her sheltered life quite matched the immensity of what he described. And yet, Aerandir's voice itself was like a distant sea-song, rising and falling in her ears. She could almost feel a phantom breeze on her curls and hear the deep surging "hush" of a faraway tide. A pleasant drowsiness stole over her, as if lulled by the thought of the ocean's cradle. "It sounds lovely," she whispered, opening her eyes slowly. "Lovely and… lulling."

Aerandir regarded her with a tender smile. "Yes," he murmured. "To me, the Sea's voice is the most soothing lullaby of all. Many an evening in the Grey Havens I have stood at the shore and listened until I felt all weariness and care slip away with the tide."

For a moment, neither of them spoke, letting the imagined sound of the waves fill the silence. Daisy realized she had drawn a bit closer to Aerandir as he spoke, as unconsciously as a child drawn to a storyteller by the fire. She flushed and pulled back slightly, but the Elf did not seem to mind. He glanced at her with a thoughtful expression, as though weighing how to continue.

"Not all who dwell in Middle-earth have heard that sound," Aerandir said at length, "and fewer still will hear it in days to come." His voice was calm, but there was a wistful note beneath it. "Most of my kin have already left these shores. The white ships sail into the West, one by one. Soon, perhaps, none of us will remain in the Havens or the Tower Hills. Our time here is ending."

He spoke plainly, but the simplicity of his words only made them more bittersweet. Daisy felt a pang in her heart. She had known, in some distant way, that the Elves were departing; old Mr. Bilbo had spoken of it before he left the Shire, and even in Hobbiton they'd heard rumors of Elvenfolk slowly diminishing. But to hear Aerandir say *soon there will be none* made the reality keen and sorrowful.

"Truly *none*?" she asked in a hushed voice. "No Elves at all left in Middle-earth…?"

Aerandir turned his face up to the sky, where a few stars still glimmered between the drifting clouds. "One day, not far off, that will be so," he replied. "The Eldar were not given a lasting home here. We have lingered many long years, through ages of the world, but now the wide shores of Valinor call to us. We must sail, or fade as a memory." He looked back at Daisy, and his eyes were grave, though kind. "I am one of the last to remain. Even tonight, my own company of folk waits in the woods yonder." He nodded towards the western trees beyond the clearing. "They will depart with the next flowing tide. I lingered to visit this tower once more… and thus I had the fortune to meet you."

Daisy felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes unexpectedly. She blinked them away, trying to smile. "I'm… very glad I met you, too," she said, her voice catching slightly. "But it saddens me to think you'll all be gone. The Shire will feel emptier knowing there are no Elves over the far downs, even if most of my neighbors don't believe in Elves to begin with." She managed a soft chuckle, though it was edged with melancholy. "They're wrong, of course. You're real—and oh! I wish they could see what I have seen tonight."

The Elf regarded her gently. “Perhaps it is meant that only you should, Daisy. Sometimes the smallest and most secret encounters carry the greatest weight in our hearts.”

She fell quiet at that, turning Aerandir’s words over in her mind.

She wondered what her mother would say if she could see her daughter now, keeping vigil under the open sky with an Elf-lord for company. What would the villagers think, those sensible hobbits who rarely ventured beyond their garden gates? Daisy suspected that even if she recounted every detail, most of them would only smile politely and dismiss it as one of Daisy’s fanciful yarns. The thought made her heart ache with a strange loneliness—this night was so special, so *real* to her, yet she might never be able to fully share it with those back home. How could she explain the gentle gravity in Aerandir’s voice when he spoke of the Sea, or the way the silence around the ruined tower felt alive with memory? These things were beyond ordinary words.

The two of them sat side by side now on the broad stone beneath the ruined arch, wrapped in the enchantment of shared understanding. Daisy realized she *was* indeed sitting very close to him; at some point during their talk he had joined her on the low stone. It felt natural, as if the gulf between hobbit and elf had vanished entirely. She drew comfort from his presence, even as the knowledge of their imminent parting cast a wistful shadow over her thoughts.

As the night deepened, a profound stillness settled around them. The moon had long set, and the stars wheeled onward in their courses. By Daisy’s reckoning it must be well past midnight now. An owl hooted softly from the oak grove, and the flicker of her little lantern flame grew weak as the oil began to dwindle. Daisy found herself reflecting on just how far from home she truly was—farther in spirit than in miles. Only two days ago she had been in her familiar bed under the round green door, with no company but her own dreams. Now she was here on a hill at the very edge of the Shire, conversing through the night with an Elven wanderer. It felt like stepping into a story from the old tales.

Aerandir must have sensed her melancholy, for he spoke softly after a long period of quiet. “A penny for your thoughts, as your people say?” he asked, pronouncing the Hobbit phrase in a quaint, careful way. There was a gentle mirth in his tone.

Daisy started, then gave a guilty laugh. “Oh, I was just thinking about how I’ll ever explain all this when I go home. I feel as though I’ve crossed into a dream tonight. No one back in my village would believe me if I told them I spent the night singing with an Elf under an old tower!” She shook her head, smiling despite the tears that still lingered at the corners of her eyes. “They’d think I’d cracked, or had too much ale at the Green Dragon.”

Aerandir laughed quietly. “Then perhaps do not trouble to explain,” he said. “Let this night be your own secret treasure. No other needs to know it fully, save you and I.”

“Our secret,” Daisy echoed softly, nodding. The idea comforted her: a precious secret kept safe in her heart, a memory shining like a private star she could always look to. “Still,” she went on with a brighter tone, “if I did tell my cousin Primrose, she’d be ever so jealous. She made me promise I’d bring back a dazzling tale if I met an Elf. I suppose *this* tale would dazzle her indeed!”

Aerandir's eyes glinted like moonlit steel. "Well, you have certainly met an Elf, and I dare hope I have lived up to the tales," he said playfully.

"Oh, you have!" Daisy replied with a musical laugh. "In truth, I think the reality outshines the stories. None of the old tales quite capture how... how *kind* your folk are. I'll never forget it."

Aerandir inclined his head, accepting the compliment with quiet grace. "You honor us, Daisy. And we will not forget you either." There was a pause, and then he added, almost to himself, "A little song of the Shire beneath the towers of Emyn Beraid—truly, such a meeting was not in my foresight, yet I am glad beyond words for it."

They fell silent after that, companionable and content. So much had been said and shared that words were no longer needed. Daisy felt a pleasant weariness settling over her, the kind that comes after a night of both merriment and deep conversation. She leaned back against a fragment of carved stone, gazing up at the sky. Fewer stars were visible now; a gauzy grey light was slowly overtaking the darkness along the eastern horizon.

After a time, Aerandir stood and stretched his limbs elegantly. Daisy realized that the black of night had softened to a charcoal blue. The world was on the cusp of dawn. A faint chill hung in the air, and she pulled herself up as well, wrapping her cloak tightly around her shoulders. Side by side, they moved out from under the arch to an open spot in the clearing where they could see the broad sweep of the eastern sky beyond the dark silhouettes of distant hills.

"The night is nearly over," Aerandir said, his voice low. There was no sorrow in it now, only a kind of reverence.

Daisy nodded. She found she had no words, only feelings that swelled in her chest as she watched the horizon. In the silence, the eastern sky grew slowly pale, a thin blush of pearl and pink above the unseen lands beyond the Shire. The last stars flickered and faded, one by one, surrendering to the gentle coming of day. Only the brightest star of all lingered for a while—low in the west, a solitary white jewel trembled against the sky, shining as if in fond farewell before it, too, vanished into the dawn's light.

Daisy let out a soft breath. She felt Aerandir's hand rest lightly on her shoulder, a gesture at once comforting and bittersweet. Together the Hobbit and the Elf stood and watched as the first glimmer of sunrise touched the clouds. The cool, dew-laden breeze of morning stirred Daisy's curls and rustled the leaves overhead. Somewhere in the grass, a lark began to trill a tentative, sweet song to greet the day.

A great peace fell upon Daisy's heart in that moment. Though the coming of morning would surely part them, this night of songs and friendship would forever live in her memory. She stole a glance up at Aerandir. He was smiling as he gazed east, his keen eyes reflective, the wind gently lifting his hair. There was both joy and sorrow in his fair face—sorrow for the night that was ending, perhaps, but joy for the dawn and what it might bring.

Without a word, Daisy reached and took Aerandir's hand in her own small one. He turned to her in mild surprise, then his expression softened and he gave her hand a gentle, reassuring squeeze. No words were needed between them now.

In the pale silver light before sunrise, an immortal Elf and a humble Hobbit stood together on the heights beyond the far downs, watching the eastern sky grow brighter by the moment. The long night was over, and a new day was about to begin—yet in both their hearts they knew that the songs sung in the darkness would echo forever, like stars gently ringing in the dawn.

ChatGPT

Chapter Eight: Farewell to the Elf-tower

A hush lay over the ruins of Elostirion as the night waned. A pale silver dimness crept into the eastern sky, and the brightest stars were fading one by one. In the stillness before dawn, Daisy and Aerandir sat side by side on a fallen marble stone beneath the oak trees. Neither spoke. They simply listened—to the soft sigh of the wind through the leaves, to the distant call of an early bird—and to the quiet company of each other. Daisy drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, breathing in the cool air. She wished this peaceful hour would never end. For a moment she closed her eyes, trying to hold the feeling: here she was, a simple hobbit-lass far from home, resting in the shadow of an elven tower with a friend out of legend. It felt as though the world held its breath with her, suspended in a gentle enchantment. If only the dawn would never come, she thought wistfully, then they need not part.

But dawn *was* coming. Aerandir's gaze was turned westward to where the sky was still deep and starry. Now he rose quietly to his feet, and Daisy opened her eyes. The Elf's tall silhouette stood against the whitening sky. He looked up, and Daisy followed his gaze to the Morning Star trembling high above, the last jewel of the night. "The hour grows late," Aerandir murmured at last, breaking the silence. "Midnight is long past. Soon it will be day." He turned to Daisy, a gentle sadness in his smile. "The time has come for me to depart."

Daisy felt her heart constrict. She had known, in some unspoken way, that this moment was near, yet hearing the words still sent a pang through her. She scrambled up at once, not wanting to appear ungracious. "So soon?" she managed in a small voice. Her legs were stiff from sitting, and she swayed a little as she stood. Aerandir reached out as if to steady her, but Daisy steadied herself. She tipped back her head to look up into his face. In the dim light his features were calm and fair as ever, but she thought she saw a wistful gleam in his grey eyes.

Aerandir placed a hand over his heart and bowed slightly. "Thank you, Daisy," he said softly, "for keeping company with me on this last night of my wandering here. It has been a greater gift than you know." He paused, as if choosing his next words carefully. "I go now to rejoin my people. They will wonder at my delay." There was a weight to his voice that told Daisy this was no ordinary farewell. *Last night of my wandering…* The phrase settled in her mind with a kind of finality. A chill that had nothing to do with the night air ran over her skin.

"Your… last night?" she whispered. "Aerandir, I—" She fumbled with her words, emotion welling in her throat. *He's leaving Middle-earth,* she realized. *He's going away, just as Mr. Bilbo said the Elves would do, and I shall not see him again.* Daisy's eyes blurred with sudden tears. "I don't suppose," she began again, trying to keep her voice from trembling, "I don't suppose we shall meet again… will we?"

The Elf-lord was silent for a moment, regarding her kindly. His own voice, when he answered, was quiet and solemn. "Not in Middle-earth," he said. "Not in this world, I fear." He gave a small shake of his head, silver hair catching the faint light. "But take heart, Daisy. Oft times mortals and Elves meet but once, yet that one meeting may be a bright thread woven into both our tales." He attempted a smile for her sake, though Daisy heard the sorrow behind his words.

Daisy wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand and tried to return his smile. If this was to be the end of their brief fellowship, she wanted him to know how much it meant to her. “I’m *so* glad to have met you,” she said earnestly. “Truly I am. I shall never forget this night — the stories you told, and the songs you sang… and your kindness to me, a wandering hobbit who lost her way.” Her voice quavered despite her efforts at bravery. “Thank you, Aerandir.” She made a little bobbing curtsy, though tears were spilling down her cheeks now. “Thank you *so* much.”

Aerandir’s expression softened with compassion. “Do not say *lost*, Daisy,” he answered gently. “Your feet found the very path they were meant to. It is I who should thank *you* — you have brought cheer to my heart this night, when I thought to spend it alone.” For a moment he hesitated, as if overcome by feeling. Then, moved by a sudden thought, he drew a breath and smiled more brightly. “Stay but a moment.”

He swept aside the grey cloak he wore and reached within, producing a small object that glinted in his hand. Aerandir stepped closer to Daisy and held it out: a fine silver chain from which hung a white crystal pendant. The jewel glowed with a gentle radiance, as if a fragment of starlight had been caught in its depths. Daisy gasped softly at its beauty. The light of it felt like a warm blessing on her face.

“It is lovely,” she breathed, scarcely daring to touch it.

Aerandir lifted the necklace and offered it to her. “It is yours,” he said.

Daisy’s eyes widened and she took a step back in astonishment. “Oh, I couldn’t possibly accept—” she began, shaking her head. But the Elf would not be refused. He took her small hand and pressed the pendant into her palm, folding her fingers gently around it. His touch was cool and reassuring.

“Please,” said Aerandir. “It is a simple token of friendship. A *star-glass*, crafted by the Elves of Lindon. It will shine when nights are darkest, to give hope to those who wander in shadow.” He closed Daisy’s fingers over the smooth, jewel-like phial. The radiance leaked between her fingers, a soft white glow. “Keep it, and let it be a light for you on your road, however far or near you travel.”

Daisy was at a loss for words. She stared at the glowing jewel in her hand, then up at Aerandir. *A star-glass… hope in darkness…* It was a gift far beyond anything she had ever owned, as precious as if he had handed her a piece of the Moon. “I will treasure it always,” she whispered, her throat tight. Fresh tears rimmed her eyes, but now they were tears of wonder and gratitude.

In the next instant, Daisy remembered her manners. No hobbit would accept a gift without offering something in return, and certainly not a gift as priceless as this. “Wait—” she said, sniffing and hastily wiping her nose on her sleeve. “It’s not right that I go without giving *you* something.”

She thought frantically. Of course she had nothing an Elf-lord would want… nothing at all, save perhaps the very clothes on her back. But then Daisy’s hand went to the narrow blue ribbon that tied the end of her dark braid. An idea came to her, and she felt a shy resolve kindle in her heart. With fumbling fingers she tugged the ribbon loose from her hair. Threaded on that cornflower-blue ribbon was a tiny wooden bead carved in the shape of a five-petaled flower. It was a keepsake her mother had given her years ago for luck. Daisy hesitated only a second; the bead was precious to her, but *he* was giving *her* something far more precious. She slipped the bead off the ribbon and then retied the ribbon around it, securing it firmly.

Offering both of her small hands, Daisy presented the blue ribbon and carved bead to the Elf. “It’s not much,” she said apologetically. “Hardly anything at all, really… b-but maybe it will remind you of me. Something to remember a hobbit by, if you like.” She blushed, suddenly fearing it was a very silly gift. What use had an immortal Elf for a bit of ribbon and wood?

Aerandir did not laugh. Instead, he accepted her little offering as though she were handing him a treasure of great worth. He bowed low before her, one hand on his heart and the other cradling the ribbon. “I am honored,” he said, and his voice was musical with sincerity. “I shall keep this always in memory of this night—and of Daisy Brockhouse, who had the courage to step beyond her door.”

Daisy’s cheeks flushed pink at his praise. To hear her own name spoken in such a way, and to know he truly meant it, filled her with a quiet pride. She bobbed her head, not trusting herself to speak without weeping again.

Aerandir straightened and took a step back. He swept his arm to his breast in a graceful salute, and raised his hand outward with palm open in an ancient gesture of farewell and blessing. The starlight gleamed on his hair and the edges of his grey cloak. Daisy felt a lump in her throat, but she lifted her own hand in answer, mirroring the gesture as best she could. Her small hand trembled in the air.

“Farewell, Aerandir,” she said softly. She tried to make her voice sound cheerful and brave, but it came out a tremble. Tears shone on her round cheeks.

“Farewell, little sister of the Shire,” Aerandir replied. His bright eyes glistened as he spoke his parting blessing for her. “May your stars shine safe, and your hearth-fire burn ever warm.”

Such simple words, yet Daisy felt the blessing settle on her like gentle sunlight. She would carry those words for the rest of her days. In that moment she could not speak at all—she could only look up at Aerandir and smile through her tears, hoping he understood all that she meant by it: gratitude, admiration, and sorrow at their parting.

For a heartbeat they stood thus, gazing at one another—the hobbit and the Elf. The night breeze stirred softly in the oak leaves around them, as if whispering a benediction of its own. Then a faint light glimmered in the shadows under the trees behind Aerandir. It flickered like a will-o’-the-wisp among the trunks. Daisy blinked and peered past him. She saw now the shapes of several tall figures standing quietly in the grove below. A few subtle lanterns were glowing in their hands, silver-white like captured starlight.

Aerandir glanced over his shoulder and back to Daisy. “My kin await me,” he said gently. “They have come to say their farewells to these shores.”

Even as he spoke, one of the distant figures lifted a clear voice in call. Though the words were in Elvish and low-spoken, Daisy caught the lilt of Aerandir’s name on the air. The company of Elves had been waiting silently, unwilling to intrude upon the two friends’ goodbye, but now the time had come for all of them to depart.

Aerandir met Daisy's eyes one last time and smiled, a look of fondness and hope that she would remember him. Daisy managed a brave smile in return, though her tears had not stopped. "Go in peace," she said softly. "And… and thank you."

He inclined his head. "Namárië," he replied in his own tongue—a word of farewell. Then, with a final nod, Aerandir turned and stepped away from the ruin. Daisy watched through her blur of tears as he moved lightly down the slope to join the other Elves. At once, several among the fair folk fell in beside him, their pale faces and hair catching the last glints of moonlight. Tall and graceful they were, gliding silently over the grass. Their lanterns bobbed gently, casting dancing star-beams on the ground. It was as if a procession of living starlight were winding its way down the western side of the hill.

Daisy stood motionless in the dim, watching them go. Her heart ached to see Aerandir's shining figure recede into the darkness. The Elves disappeared one by one into the shadow of the oak-wood, heading westward. For a moment, just before the last Elf passed from view, Daisy heard a snatch of soft song rise on the night air—a clear voice mingling with the wind. The melody was fair and sad, full of yearning. Then it too faded, and all was quiet. The Elves were gone.

A long silence followed. Daisy remained where she was, alone in the ancient clearing. The ruins of the Elf-tower loomed quietly around her, their white stones now cold and colourless in the hour before dawn. The little world that she and Aerandir had made between them—a circle of lantern-light, laughter, and song amid these old stones—had vanished with the night. Daisy pressed a hand to her mouth, suddenly overwhelmed. Had it all truly happened? It felt like the lingering sweetness of a dream that one hates to wake from. The only proof that it was real was the cool weight of the star-glass pendant in her other hand, and the blue ribbon Aerandir had taken, now absent from her hair.

She looked down at the jewel resting in her palm. It still glowed with a tiny flame, casting soft white luminescence on her brown hand. A tear fell onto her hand, sparkling in the star-glass's light. Daisy realized she was crying in earnest now—tears of sorrow, and of joy too. "Goodbye, Aerandir," she whispered into the silence. Her words vanished into the chill air. She sniffled and hastily dashed the tears from her eyes. There was no use standing about and weeping; the night was nearly over, and home was calling.

Indeed, as Daisy lifted her head, she saw that the sky to the east was turning the color of mother-of-pearl. The moon had drifted down in the west and was just touching the horizon, weary from its long journey across the sky. In a short while, the sun would be rising. A new day would dawn, with its ordinary rhythms of breakfast and chores in the Shire… and no one at home would know what wonders she had seen in the dark hours before. The thought of that familiar, cozy life sent a sudden pang of longing through Daisy. Home felt very far away right now—but it also beckoned her. She could almost smell her mother's baking and the clean scent of morning in her own little garden. Yes, it was time to return.

Daisy took the fine silver chain of the Elf's necklace and carefully looped it around her neck. The crystal pendant settled just over her heart, and she tucked it securely beneath her shawl. Its comforting glow was hidden now, but she could feel a gentle warmth where it rested against her. She picked up her wicker basket and the small travelling cloak she had brought. Her own tin lantern, she noticed, had burned itself out sometime during the night, its candle spent. No matter—the waning moon and the first gleam of dawn provided enough light to see her way, and soon even that little moonlight would yield to the morning.

For a final moment, Daisy stood in the ruin and gazed around slowly. The great pale stones of Elostirion's base loomed ghostly in the half-light. High above, through the jagged crown of the tower, the last star of night twinkled. Everything was silent and empty now, yet Daisy felt no fear. Though the Elves had departed, a sense of peace still lingered here, as if the very stones remembered their laughter and grace. Daisy placed her hand on the curved trunk of an oak tree at the clearing's edge. "Farewell," she murmured, unsure if she spoke to the tree, the tower, or only herself. "Farewell... and thank you." She bowed her head, offering quiet gratitude for the wonders of the night.

Then Daisy Brockhouse squared her small shoulders, pulled her cloak tight about herself, and turned from the Elf-tower. With careful steps she began to make her way down the same path by which she had come. The dew-damp grass brushed her feet as she descended from the hill's crown, and a cool breeze followed behind her, stirring the oak leaves in a soft chorus. In the east, the pearly sky grew brighter with each passing minute, heralding the sunrise. As Daisy set off on her journey home, she felt both aching sadness and profound wonder mingling in her heart. The world was the same as it had been yesterday—green hills and grey ruins, dusk turning to dawn—but *she* was not the same. She carried a light now, a secret brightness burning just for her, gifted by an Elf from over the Sea. And though her eyes were still wet with tears, Daisy smiled as she walked eastward, into the coming day.

ChatGPT

Chapter Nine: There and Back Again

Dawn's first pale light was just touching the sky as Daisy Brockhouse descended the last steps of the ancient tower. A cool grey hush lay over Elostirion's ruins. Behind her, the white stones of the Elf-tower loomed silent and ghostly in the dim glow. Ahead, eastward, the world was beginning to stir with morning. Daisy paused on the hillside path and drew a deep breath. The air was cold and fresh, smelling of damp earth and distant rain, and each exhale clouded before her lips. High above, one steadfast star still glimmered in the fading darkness—Eärendil's star, bright and alone in the west. Daisy's fingers strayed to the fine silver chain about her neck, touching the small crystal pendant that hung there. The **star-glass** felt cool against her skin, but as she held it she fancied she felt a gentle warmth, a pulse of light answering the last star of night. She remembered how Aerandir had pressed this very jewel into her hand only hours ago, and how he had called her *"little sister of the Shire."* The memory brought a prickling of emotion to her eyes—part sorrow, part wonder. With a soft whisper of farewell, Daisy turned and continued down the green slope, leaving the Elf-tower behind in the dawn.

All around her lay the quiet shapes of the Tower Hills. The grass on the slopes was silvered with **dew**, each blade catching the new light. As Daisy walked, her skirt brushed the tall grasses, shaking free thousands of tiny droplets that sparkled like a spray of diamonds. The only sounds were her own light footsteps and the occasional drip of moisture from leaf to leaf. She made her way through the grove of old oaks at the hill's foot—the very grove where, only a short time ago, she had seen Aerandir's kin waiting under the shadows. Now the oaks stood silent and still. Dawn wove long golden beams between their gnarled trunks, illuminating patches of mossy ground in a pale glow. There was no sign of the Elves; they had gone quietly in the night, leaving no footprint that a hobbit could discern. Yet as Daisy stepped through the last of the oak trees, she felt a hush lingering in the air, a sense that something ancient had passed that way. In the silence, a single bird began to sing—a high, clear trill from a thicket nearby. Soon another answered it, and then a third; a delicate chorus of **birdsong** rose to greet the morning. Daisy stood listening for a moment, a small smile on her lips. The music of the waking birds mingled in her heart with an echo of the Elven songs she had heard under the stars. It was as if the land itself were singing, and she was part of the song.

She walked on, retracing her steps eastward through the wide, rolling **Far Downs**. In the dawn light, the downs were a sweep of soft green and grey, empty of any moving thing save the wind. Daisy remembered how these hills had seemed so vast and strange when first she ventured beyond the Shire. Now, in the morning quiet, they felt friendly and familiar, yet still tinged with mystery. A faint mist clung to the hollows between hills, pooling like spilled silver in the valleys. As she climbed a gentle rise, the mist swirled around her ankles and the cool wetness of the dew soaked into her worn leather boots. Daisy did not mind in the least. She felt invigorated by the chill and by the **golden light** that was slowly spreading across the sky. The east was growing brighter with each passing minute, a promise of sunrise coloring the few wisps of cloud in peach and rose. The western sky behind her was deep blue still, fading to pearl above the dim line of distant sea. She glanced back only once, to see the top of Elostirion far behind, a pale silhouette against the dawn. *Farewell,* she thought silently, sending the word toward that lonely tower and beyond, to the Elf-friend who even now would be making his way west. For a moment, Daisy fancied she could hear, very far away, a single **clear voice singing** on the morning breeze—a last vestige of Elven song carried from the west. It was

so faint she could not be sure it was real, but the beauty of it brought tears to her eyes. She blinked them away and continued on with a lightness in her step, humming softly as she went.

The path she had followed out now wound back the way she came, over knolls and down into gentle dells. Before long, Daisy found herself approaching a small grassy rise that she remembered well. Crowned upon that knoll was a ring of standing stones: the **ancient stone circle** she had discovered on her journey outward. In the full light of day it had looked eerie and forbidding, but now in the dawn it appeared as a benign gathering of old friends watching her return. The stones stood just as before—tall, weathered grey monoliths draped in soft green moss. Drops of dew beaded on the mossy beards and ran down the worn faces of the rocks like tears of the morning. Daisy's heart quickened with fond recognition. She could not resist climbing the knoll once more to pay her respects to this strange and kindly place. At the foot of one stone, she noticed a patch of tiny white wildflowers, their star-shaped petals opening anew with the touch of daylight. She remembered plucking a bloom from that very spot when she first came here, tucking it at her collar as a keepsake. Reaching up, Daisy found the crumpled remnant of that flower still pinned there, now dried and brown after its adventure. Gently, she unpinned it and laid it at the base of the standing stone, where a fresh white flower grew. "Thank you," she whispered, not entirely sure what she was thanking—perhaps the hills, or the old secret in the stones, or simply the luck that had accompanied her this far. Then she stepped into the center of the stone circle as she had once before. The air inside the ring felt cool and still. She stood very quietly for a few breaths, gazing at the world framed by those ancient pillars. The sky overhead was a tender blue, streaked with the last pastel clouds of dawn. Everything seemed momentarily hushed, expectant. Daisy closed her eyes and felt again that strange tingling sensation, as if the very sky were holding its breath. But unlike the first time, she felt no fear. Instead she felt a gentle peace radiating through her, as though unseen eyes watched over her kindly. In that silence, Daisy could almost imagine that the stones remembered her from before, and were quietly glad at her return. With a soft laugh at her own fancy, Daisy opened her eyes, pinned a **new white flower** to her collar for remembrance, and bid the circle farewell. She made her way back down the knoll, leaving the standing stones to their solitude.

The path led onward, rising toward the east. Daisy climbed a long, rolling ridge that curved before her like a great green wave. This was the high ridge from which she had first glimpsed the Tower Hills days ago. The effort of climbing made her breathe faster, but the air was so fresh and invigorating that she hardly noticed her weariness. When she reached the **crest of the ridge**, she paused and turned around one last time. From this height, she could see the broad lands she had crossed: the folds of the downs lay dim behind her, cloaked here and there with low fog. Beyond, on the far western horizon, stood three small hummocks of darker green—the Tower Hills, now many leagues away. Daisy shaded her eyes with her hand. If she looked very hard, she fancied she could pick out a tiny white glint on one of those green hills, like a spike of light against the sky. It might have been a last reflection of dawn on Elostirion's ruined crown, or perhaps it was only her imagination. Either way, Daisy smiled to see it. *There is the end of my little road,* she thought. *I was really there.* A great swell of emotion filled her chest: pride at having come so far, gratitude for all she had experienced, and a bittersweet ache knowing that a beautiful chapter was closing. With a final wave of her hand—half in farewell to the distant towers, half in thanks—she turned her back to the west and faced home.

Just ahead, at the foot of the ridge, lay the hedgerow boundary of the Shire. Daisy could see the neat line of bushes and low trees separating the wild downs from the tended fields of her village. In that hedge was the familiar **old stile** where she had begun her adventure. The sight of its mossy stone steps made Daisy's heart leap with both joy and a twinge of reluctance. How small and humble it looked now, after all the miles

she had trod beyond it! She walked down the slope toward the stile, the grass growing more trim and tame as she went. Coming to the border, she rested a hand on the weathered wood of the post that steadied the steps. A thin film of moss and lichen grew there, plush and emerald in the damp morning. Daisy ran her fingers over the mossy surface. Tiny ferns sprouted in the cracks of the stone where her fingers had once gripped on the way out. She remembered how excited—how *hurried*—she had been when she first clambered over this stile, eager to see the wide world outside the Shire. Now she lingered, one foot on the lowest step, reluctant to cross over too quickly. Beyond the hedge, the fields of home lay waiting, hushed and peaceful in the early light. Daisy's village was still mostly asleep; no lanterns showed in the windows, and no thin columns of chimney smoke had yet appeared in the clear air. It would be so easy to delay a little longer—perhaps wander along the hedge, or sit on the stile and watch the morning unfold. A soft breeze came sighing through the hazel leaves, as if to invite her to stay just a few minutes more in the wild. Daisy closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. She could smell the sweet fragrance of Shire clover from the fields mingling with the wild scent of the downs—a scent *"wild and sweet, with a hint of salt,"* just as she had noticed when first stepping out. It would be hard to leave this freedom behind.

But then she thought of her family: her mother likely stirring soon to make the breakfast porridge, her father yawning and reaching for his pipe, her little sister still bundled in quilts. Daisy had promised she would return to them, and she felt a warm tug at her heart at the thought of home's comforts. However far her feet had wandered, this was where they would always lead her in the end. Smiling softly, she patted the top of the stile as if in thanks and then climbed over, stepping down into the Shire once again. At that very moment, the **sun's rim** broke over the **eastern fields**. Golden morning light spilled across the patchwork of dewy grass and tilled rows, chasing long shadows away. Daisy stood for an instant in awe: the familiar countryside of home was transformed under the dawn, glowing as fair as any far land. A **rooster** crowed somewhere off in the distance, its cry echoing over the gentle hills. The spell of the night and the downs was not broken at all, she realized—it lived quietly here too, in every beam of sunrise touching the simple fields. Daisy laughed aloud, a bright, relieved sound that startled a pair of skylarks into flight. They burst from the hedgerow and spiraled upward, twittering as if scolding this early riser. Daisy watched them go with a grin. Then she gathered her shawl tighter about her shoulders and headed across the wet grass toward her village, leaving a trail of faint footprints that glittered briefly in the newborn sun.

No other hobbit was yet out and about as Daisy walked through the lane of her village. The doors and round windows of the snug hobbit-holes were shut, some curtained against the growing light. A tabby cat watched her from a gatepost, then yawned and settled back down to resume its sleep. Everything was so ordinary and peaceful that one might think she had only been out for a morning stroll. Daisy couldn't help but giggle at the thought: technically, she hadn't so much *stayed out late* as gotten a very *early start* today. It was almost as if she had looped around time itself—coming home at the hour she would normally be waking. She felt a sudden, lighthearted giddiness at that notion, and it carried her all the way to the little gate of her own garden.

Daisy's family burrow was exactly as she had left it: the front garden wild with late summer marigolds, the round door painted cheerful yellow and set with a brass knob in the middle. Dew had gathered on the garden path's flagstones and the scent of wet earth and flowers was strong. Daisy quietly unlatched the gate and tiptoed up the path. She fumbled for a moment under a loose stone by the door, where a spare key was hidden, only to laugh softly at herself—of course the door wasn't locked. It rarely was in their friendly village. Carefully, she turned the knob and slipped inside.

She was greeted by **quiet and darkness**, save for the faint grey light filtering in through the round windows. The **house was peaceful**, filled with the familiar smells of home: the ashes of last night's fire in the hearth, a hint of coffee grounds left in the pot, and the faint spicy scent of dried herbs hanging in the kitchen. Daisy set down her small pack and propped her walking stick silently in the umbrella stand. On the little bench by the door sat her family's shoes and boots, all in a tidy row. She added her own damp, muddy boots to the line, smiling at how drab and travel-worn they looked next to her mother's polished town shoes and her sister's tiny slippers. The **parlor clock** was ticking steadily on the mantel, each tick echoing loud in the predawn hush. That gentle **tick-tock** was the only sound, and to Daisy it was the sweetest music in the world at that moment.

Her stomach gave a sudden rumble—now that she was safe at home, she realized she was **hungry**. (Adventures, even gentle ones, have a way of sharpening a hobbit's appetite.) Padding softly into the kitchen, Daisy set the remains of her provisions on the table: an uneaten bread roll and a wedge of cheese she had carried with her but never got around to finishing. She then sliced herself a fresh piece of bread from the loaf in the bread-box and spread it thickly with blackberry jam. As she stood by the window nibbling the slice, the first rays of the sun peeked over the garden wall, casting a warm glow into the kitchen. In that golden light, the brass teakettle on the stove gleamed, and motes of dust twirled like tiny stars in the air. **Everything around her was just as it had been**—the teapot on its hook, the **steady tick of the clock** in the hall, the beloved portrait of her grandparents on the wall—**yet Daisy felt a comforting new warmth in it all**. The world seemed at once utterly ordinary and yet layered with **secret beauty**, as if a **soft song** were now playing behind the everyday sounds of morning. She closed her eyes and listened. Yes, there it was—not a literal music, but a gentle harmony threading through the quiet clock ticks, the distant chirp of sparrows outside, and the rustle of the curtains in the breeze. It was the melody of memory and magic, of night and home interwoven. It lived in her heart now, a secret she would carry from this day on.

Daisy finished the last bite of bread and quietly brushed the crumbs from her hands. She felt pleasantly tired at last, as one does after a long night and a happy homecoming. Setting the plate aside, she crept down the hallway. The floorboards were cool under her feet and she stepped carefully to avoid the one that creaked. She passed the open doorway to the sitting room, where the ashes in the fireplace glowed faintly from yesterday's fire. The clock continued its patient ticking, measuring moments that seemed both utterly unchanged and newly precious. Daisy paused by the mantle where her mother's good candlesticks stood. In the low light, she caught a faint glimmer and noticed that the crystal pendant she wore was shimmering still, a tiny bead of light beneath her shawl. She touched it through the fabric and smiled softly. *A light for you on your road, however far or near you travel*—Aerandir's parting words echoed in her mind. How far she had traveled, and yet here she was, home again where she began, with something of that light still with her.

On tiptoe, Daisy made her way to her little bedroom at the end of the hall. The door was ajar, just as she'd left it. Slipping inside, she allowed herself one sigh of relief as she took in the sight and scent of her own room. The quilt on her bed was slightly rumpled from when she had risen in the dark yesterday morning, and her bedside book lay open, just as if she had only stepped out for a moment. Through the round window above her writing desk, fresh **morning light** streamed in. Daisy crossed to the window and drew back the lace curtain, careful not to clatter the rod. From here she could see beyond the garden and over the hedgerows of the Shire's border. The line of the Far Downs undulated on the horizon, touched with the rosy haze of sunrise. If she squinted, she fancied she could just make out a tiny white **speck** far, far beyond those hills—the last trace of a tall tower where an Elf had sung farewell to the stars. Daisy gazed at that distant glimmer for a long moment, her heart full. "I will remember," she whispered, repeating a promise she had made in her heart. Then she let the curtain fall back and turned to the comforts of home.

Setting the star-glass necklace gently on her bedside table, Daisy sat on the edge of her bed and began to unpin her hair. Her curls tumbled down about her shoulders, freed from the ribbon she had given away in friendship. She ran her fingers through them, feeling a slight breeze from the open window play with the loose strands. On the breeze came the homely smells of breakfast: someone in the village had started frying bacon, and the faint sizzle and scent carried on the still air. Daisy smiled, imagining the kitchens of her neighbors coming to life—the clink of pans and cheerful chatter that would soon follow. Her own house, however, remained quiet. Not a soul had woken while she slipped in. It felt as though she had snuck a secret into the very walls, a candle of wonder only she knew was burning.

For a long moment, Daisy simply sat there in her cozy room, letting the *quiet of home* enfold her. The only sound was the steady ticking of the old clock in the parlour, a familiar rhythm that seemed to say *all is well*. Tears pricked her eyes, but they were warm, happy tears. She hugged herself lightly, filled with an inward glow. **Home** — the word itself was like a gentle lullaby. Everything here was as it ever was, solid and reassuring. And yet *she* was not quite the same. Daisy knew that in the days and years to come, she would carry this dawn in her heart. She would remember the far hills in moonlight, the echo of elven song, the feel of starlight in her hand. Ordinary life would go on, simple and sweet, but now she understood that even the ordinary held its own magic. As she finally curled up under her patchwork quilt and listened to the comforting sounds of her family stirring awake down the hall, Daisy Brockhouse closed her eyes with a contented sigh. She was home, back in her little corner of the Shire—**there and back again**—and nothing had changed, except for the secret *light* and wonder she now carried quietly in her own dear heart.

ChatGPT

Chapter Ten: The Shining Secret

Daisy woke to the gentle clatter of dishes and the warm smell of baked apples drifting through the burrow. Sunlight was slanting in at an angle that told her it was near midday. Startled that she had slept so long, she hurriedly straightened her apron and emerged from her little bedroom. In the cozy kitchen she found her family already gathered at the table for an early dinner. Her mother looked up, relief and mild reproach mingling in her eyes.

“Good afternoon, sleepyhead,” Mother said, hands on her hips though a smile tugged at her lips. “I didn’t even hear you go out again this morning! You must have slipped off *very* early.” She shook her head in fond exasperation. Daisy realized with a flutter that they hadn’t noticed her late return – they thought she had simply risen before the dawn. She managed a disarming smile and sank into her chair.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” Daisy replied lightly. “Yes, I went out while it was still dark. I thought I might catch the wildflowers blooming at first light.” This was not a complete lie, she told herself – dawn had indeed found her out of doors, though under very different circumstances. She reached for a loaf of bread as casually as she could.

Her mother, Rose, pursed her lips, not truly angry but clearly she had been worried. “All that and not a flower to show for it,” she tutted, noticing Daisy’s empty hands.

Daisy busied herself buttering the bread to hide a guilty flush. “I… didn’t find many worth picking,” she murmured. “They were fewer than I expected.” This much was true; in her wandering, flowers had been the last thing on her mind. “So I came home with nothing at all.” She gave an apologetic little shrug.

Her father cleared his throat and wagged a finger gently. “Next time, Dais, you might at least fetch us some mushrooms if you’re bent on roaming about,” he said, half in jest. “Long walks should have some reward on the table, eh?” He chuckled, and Daisy smiled into her teacup. She knew she was forgiven. Her parents were simply relieved to have her home safe, empty-handed or no.

Only her Grandmother Maggie seemed unconvinced by the simple tale. The old hobbit matron peered at Daisy shrewdly over the rim of her teacup. “You look a touch *starry-eyed* today, my girl,” she observed in a gentle, knowing voice. “Not brewing another adventure in that head, I hope?”

Daisy nearly choked on her tea, but Gran’s tone was more teasing than accusatory. The whole family knew Daisy had always been dreamy. Still, Daisy felt her heart skip. Did Gran somehow sense something? Regaining her composure, she reached across to pat her grandmother’s hand. “Oh, no,” she said with a soft laugh. “No more adventures for me. I just had… a beautiful dream, that’s all.” She met Gran Maggie’s keen eyes and added quietly, “Truly.”

For a moment Grandmother Maggie held her gaze, and Daisy feared the old woman would ask more. There was a spark of understanding in her grandmother’s face—as if she saw more than Daisy was telling—but after a breath Gran simply nodded. “Ah, a dream,” she said, a twinkle in her eye. “That would explain it.” She

gave Daisy's hand a pat in return and said no more. Daisy exhaled, not realizing she'd been holding her breath. Some part of her suspected that Gran *knew*—or at least guessed—that Daisy's journey had been far more than a search for wildflowers. But out of love and wisdom, her grandmother let the matter rest. Daisy offered her a grateful smile, thankful that her secret would remain safely hers a while longer.

That day, and in the days and weeks that followed, life in the Westfarthing settled back into its familiar rhythm. Summer ripened toward early autumn, and the Brockhouse household buzzed with everyday bustle. Each morning the sun rose a little later, gilding the round windows of their burrow with soft gold. The world outside Daisy's round front door was just as she had left it: the well-tended vegetable garden bounded by a low stone wall, the chicken coop in the yard with its bossy rooster and clucking hens, and beyond, the rolling patchwork of fields and hedgerows of her village. All was ordinary and comfortable – yet to Daisy's eyes, subtly changed. She found herself marveling at small things that she used to overlook: the silvery sparkle of dew on the cabbage leaves at dawn, the friendly creak of the gate as she walked down the garden path, even the sound of the kettle humming on the hearth. It was as if a soft unseen music now played behind the everyday sounds of home, lending each moment a secret sweetness.

Daisy gladly threw herself into her chores, and there were many to catch up on. She spent the afternoons helping her mother preserve the late summer berries. Together they stood in the sunny kitchen stirring great pots of blackberry jam. The sweet scent of sugar and fruit filled the air, sunlight dancing in through the open window. One such afternoon, Daisy was gazing out that window, spoon in hand, utterly lost in thought as the jam bubbled. She was remembering the way moonlight fell through ancient oak boughs and the echo of an Elven song beneath the stars – memories that felt like a half-remembered poem.

A little burst of jam splattered up, startling her from her reverie. "Mind the pot, dear," Mother chided gently, laughing. "You'll burn the batch if you daydream too much!"

Daisy blushed and gave the pot a dutiful stir. "Sorry, Mama. I was wool-gathering again," she said with an embarrassed smile.

Rose shook her head fondly at her daughter. "You've been quite thoughtful lately," she remarked, not unkindly. She placed a hand on Daisy's shoulder. "Ever since that long walk of yours, you seem… well, somehow more content, and yet always dreaming. I can't put my finger on it."

Daisy's hand went still on the spoon for a moment. What could she say? That a single night away had changed her life? That she had touched something wondrous out in the wild world? At last she simply covered her mother's hand with her own and said softly, "I suppose I *have* a lot on my mind. But I promise I'm all right. In fact, I've never felt better."

Her mother smiled at that, studying Daisy's face. Perhaps she noted a new light there, a calm confidence in the young hobbit that hadn't been present before. "Well enough then," Rose replied, giving Daisy's shoulder a squeeze. "Whatever happened on that little outing, I daresay it did you some good. You've come back safe and sound, and maybe a bit more grown-up too."

Daisy ducked her head, pleased and a touch shy under her mother's proud gaze. She knew she had changed – in ways her mother could only guess. She finished stirring the jam and together they filled jar after jar with the gleaming preserve. Daisy found joy in the simple task, the way the deep purple-black of

the jam swirled into the jars, the way sunlight illumined each glass container as if even this homely work held a hint of enchantment.

When the work was done, Grandmother Maggie shuffled in from her afternoon nap, drawn by the sugary aroma. Daisy helped her grandmother to a seat and offered her a bit of fresh bread with the newly cooled jam. The old hobbit lady accepted with a smile, but her eyes were fixed on Daisy thoughtfully. As Daisy sat beside her, Maggie reached out and brushed an errant curl from the girl's forehead.

"You seem happy, my Daisy," Gran Maggie said quietly. "Happy and maybe a little wiser, too." Her wrinkled face creased in a gentle grin. "It's good to have you home, child."

"It's good to *be* home, Gran," Daisy replied, and she meant it with all her heart. She took her grandmother's hand. The two of them sat in companionable silence for a moment, sipping cool lemonade while Rose bustled about sealing the jam jars. Outside the kitchen window the late summer breeze sent shadows of leafy vines dancing across the sill. Daisy watched the patterns absently until her grandmother's voice drew her attention again.

"I remember an old friend of ours, Mr. Bilbo Baggins, coming back from his travels," Maggie said, seemingly apropos of nothing. She peered at Daisy with a spark of mischief. "Folk said he had changed, too. A bit quieter in some ways, a bit more adventurous in others. Talked to Elves, he did – or so he claimed – and came home with treasure and tales." She chuckled. "Most didn't believe half of it, of course."

Daisy's heart skipped at the mention of Elves, but she kept her face carefully neutral. "Really, Gran? You've mentioned Mr. Bilbo's stories before."

Grandmother Maggie nodded, tapping a finger on her jam-smeared plate. "Aye. I recall him going on about the Elf-towers beyond the Far Downs once, years back. Folks at the Green Dragon thought him a bit cracked, but I always wondered if there wasn't a grain of truth in his ramblings." Her sharp hazel eyes studied Daisy's reaction. "Seeing you now, so changed by just a night's wander, I do wonder... perhaps even the smallest journey can bring back something splendid, even if no one else can see it."

Daisy felt a sudden lump in her throat. Could her grandmother truly suspect what she had found? She lowered her gaze to her hands, which were folded in her lap. There upon her right palm was a faint white scar where the thorn of a gorse bush had pricked her during her travels. It was almost shaped like a tiny star. Daisy closed her fingers over it and whispered, "Maybe it can, Gran."

Old Maggie reached over and patted Daisy's closed hand. "All I know is, you've brought a bit of wonder back with you, my dear, and I'm glad of it." There was a gentle certainty in her voice. Then she laughed lightly to break the hush. "Ah, listen to me natter on! I'm an old woman with too many tales in my head."

Daisy impulsively leaned in and kissed her grandmother's cheek. "I like your tales," she said softly. "And... I'm glad you believe in wonders." It was the closest she dared come to an admission. Gran Maggie beamed and squeezed Daisy in a one-armed hug that smelled of lavender and blackberry jam. In that warm embrace, Daisy felt understood and loved, even with her secrets untold.

As the summer days ambled by, Daisy carried on with her humble life, tending to small tasks with great care. Each morning she collected eggs from the hens, crooning a little Shire lullaby to soothe their ruffling feathers. Each afternoon she walked down the lane to the village market if errands needed doing. The marketplace was modest – a few stalls where local hobbits traded produce, gossip, and the occasional trinket. Daisy wandered among them with a serene smile, basket on her arm. Neighbors greeted her cheerily: they were used to the curious Brockhouse girl who loved flowers and took long walks.

“Ho there, Daisy!” called old Farmer Cotton from his potato stall one bright morning. “We haven’t seen you about in a while. Not off chasing moonbeams, are you?” He winked, referencing her well-known penchant for wandering at odd hours.

Daisy laughed, selecting a ripe apple from his stand. “Not today, Mr. Cotton. I’m keeping my feet firmly on the ground.”

The farmer chuckled. “That’s the way. We can’t have you tumbling down any rabbit holes! Though,” he added kindly, “you do look as if you’ve seen something beyond the ordinary, lass. There’s a shine in your eye.”

“I’ve had a nice rest, that’s all,” Daisy replied, offering him a coin for the apple. “Maybe a bit of a new outlook.”

“Well, good for you.” He tipped his hat as she moved along. Daisy walked through the lively little market, her skirts swishing around her ankles, and realized the farmer was right – she *did* feel as if she carried a light inside her now. Though no one could see the cause, perhaps the effect showed in her face. She greeted each person she met with unusual patience and goodwill. When a fussy neighbor accidentally jostled her elbow so that a bag of sugar toppled and spilled, Daisy only laughed softly and helped sweep it up, assuring the apologetic hobbit it was no bother at all. A few of her friends exchanged surprised glances at Daisy’s gentle reaction – before her adventure, she might have been flustered or cross at the mess. Now she found it hard to be upset by such small hiccups. Her heart was simply too full of gratitude and quiet joy.

On one occasion, Daisy paused at a flower-seller’s cart. Among the bouquets of late summer blooms she spotted a cluster of white star-shaped flowers – wood anemones from the woods out west. They looked so much like the flowers that had carpeted the glade near the tower hill. She bought a small bunch and tucked it in her basket, smiling to herself. Later that day she placed those white flowers in a little vase on the kitchen table at home. When her mother admired them, Daisy merely said she had felt like bringing a bit of the wild home. Only Daisy knew that the true wild wonder she’d brought home was not those flowers at all, but a shining memory hidden safely away.

Hidden indeed – every night, in the privacy of her bedroom, Daisy would open her wooden jewelry box and uncover her greatest secret. Beneath the embroidered handkerchiefs and keepsakes, the star-glass pendant lay safe. In the daylight it appeared only a pretty crystal on a silver chain, but Daisy had seen it aglow under moon and star. Each time she lifted it from its nest, her breath caught anew at the faint glint that came from within the glass, even when no lamp was near. It was like holding a drop of condensed moonlight in her hand.

One golden evening, as the sky blushed with sunset, Daisy felt a yearning to wear the token, to keep its comfort near her heart. With everyone busy in their own tasks, she slipped the chain around her neck and

hid the crystal beneath the high collar of her dress. The cool gem pressed against her skin just over her heart. A thrill of secret delight went through her; it was as though she carried a small private star concealed beneath plain cotton and calico.

Thus, as Daisy went out to water the garden at dusk, the hidden star-glass hung under her apron, and she hummed an old Elven tune softly to herself. (It was a fragment of melody she remembered from that night on the tower hill – just a few notes that had lodged in her heart.) The crickets had begun their choir and the first stars pricked the deepening sky overhead. Daisy's garden was modest and neatly kept: rows of beans and carrots, a pumpkin vine snaking along the fence, late-blooming roses entwined on the arbor. As she sprinkled water from her can over the marigolds, Daisy realized she felt completely at peace. The ordinary evening chores, the scent of earth and leaves, the familiar sound of her mother's humming from the kitchen window – all these everyday things seemed dearer to her than ever. She knew now how blessed she was to have a home so safe and loving. Many far greater folk had wandered away over the sea, leaving behind towers and memories… but she was here, in the Shire, where the stars might be a little dimmer but the hearth was warm. And yet, because of her adventure, a bit of that far-off light *was* with her here in this very garden. She smiled, touching the secret pendant through the fabric of her dress. It was a comforting weight, a reminder that extraordinary grace can dwell even in the humblest of places.

Occasionally, late at night when the household was asleep, Daisy would slip outside to her moonlit vegetable patch for a breath of air and a few moments of solitude under the sky. On one such night, weeks after her return, she found herself drawn from her cozy bed by a restlessness in her soul. It was a clear autumn night; a hint of harvest chill sharpened the air, though summer's ghost still lingered in the warmth of the soil under her feet. Daisy wrapped a light shawl around her shoulders and crept out the round front door, making sure not to wake a soul.

The garden was silvered in gentle light. The moon had set, but the stars were countless and brilliant overhead—an ethereal river of them spilled across the sky. Daisy walked among her pumpkin leaves and sunflowers, now only dark silhouettes, until she reached the low stone wall at the edge of the garden. Beyond, the fields sloped softly away under starlight. All was hushed, save for the distant hoot of an owl and the faint rustle of night breeze through the drying summer grass.

Tilting her head back, Daisy gazed at the heavens. She could pick out a few constellations now by name—Menelvagor, the Swordsman of the Sky, and Remmirath, the Netted Stars—knowledge given to her by a kind teacher beneath an Elven tower. Her eyes sought the brightest of all, a diamond-white star hanging low in the west. **Gil-Estel**, the Star of High Hope, she recalled it was called: the very light set in the sky by Elbereth of old. Aerandir had told her that story by the ruins of Elostirion, how the great Elf-lady Elbereth kindled the stars. Daisy's throat tightened with emotion as she remembered standing beside him, hearing tales of the West and of Eärendil's star. That bright spark out there was the same star that now shone above her garden. It felt as though it were a friend watching over her from leagues away.

Slowly, Daisy pulled the silver chain from under her shawl. The crystal pendant swung free in the cool night air, and at once it caught the starlight, shimmering faintly. Daisy held it up between finger and thumb. It was glowing – just a little, but unmistakably – with a pearly luminescence of its own. Perhaps the darkness around her was enough to stir its power, or perhaps it answered to the memory in her heart. Either way, the star-glass came alive in her hand, a small living light in the night.

With tears in her eyes, Daisy lifted the gem and looked through it. The star of Eärendil refracted through the crystal, scattering tiny rainbow flecks of light across her vision. In that moment, Daisy felt once more the mingled sorrow and joy of parting with her Elven friend. She remembered Aerandir's face, aglow with moonlight as he smiled in farewell, and the words he had spoken: *"Let it be a light for you on your road, however far or near you travel."* He had given this precious gift to a simple hobbit lass so that she would never walk in darkness.

Daisy swallowed the ache that rose in her chest. Holding the star-glass gently, she breathed a few precious words into the night, her voice no louder than a sigh: **"Elbereth Gilthoniel..."** The language of the Elves felt like a sweet song on her tongue. She did not know the whole hymn, only that these were words of praise and wonder for the Queen of Stars. As they left her lips, the great sweep of sky seemed to shimmer in answer. Daisy closed her eyes, and for a moment she could almost hear voices far off, as if memory and imagination together wove the echo of an Elven hymn carried on the breeze.

She stood there for a long while, in silence, with the damp grass brushing her feet and the cool starlight draping her like a shawl. She felt very small under the sparkling firmament—small but not insignificant. She was a hobbit of the Shire, who had traveled beyond the far downs and returned. She had seen wonders and been given a token of hope, a **shining secret** now glowing softly in her hands. That secret would live in her heart forever.

Across the dark fields, a rooster crowed—the first herald of approaching dawn. The sound was homely and cheerful, utterly ordinary. Daisy opened her eyes and saw the black sky just beginning to pale to deep blue in the east. Morning was coming. She carefully tucked the star-glass pendant back beneath her shawl and breathed in the cool air, feeling the dewy energy of dawn and the lingering mystery of night all at once.

Before she went inside, Daisy cast one last glance at the western horizon, where the brightest star still winked. Somewhere beyond those far blue hills lay the Sea and the Havens, and maybe, by now, a white ship bearing her friend into the uttermost West. Daisy's heart brimmed with both wistfulness and peace at the thought. She pressed a hand over the hidden pendant on her breast. *Farewell, Aerandir,* she thought kindly. *May your stars shine safe.*

And in that quiet moment, Daisy Brockhouse made a promise to herself. She would not squander what she had been given. However humble her life here might be, she would carry the memory of that starry night always, like a lantern lit within her. She would nurture patience and wonder in her heart and share them generously – in a kind word to a neighbor, in a gentle lullaby to a child, in courage given to a friend who felt small. The light she had been given was not only for her; it would shine through her for others.

With a soft smile playing on her lips and tears drying in her eyes, Daisy turned and tiptoed back into the burrow as the first golden rays of sunrise peeked over the Green Hills. In her chest she carried dawn's light and midnight's secret side by side. Whatever tomorrow brought, she would greet it with the grace and hope she had learned beyond the far downs. For Daisy now understood, as perhaps she never would have without her journey, that even the smallest person, in their ordinary home, could hold a fragment of *extraordinary* light – and that light, however quietly kept, would illumine everything. And so she vowed to treasure her shining secret always, and to let its gentle glow guide her path and brighten the paths of those she loved, all the days of her life.

ChatGPT

Chapter Eleven: Many Partings, Many Meetings

A soft summer dusk lay over the Shire, quiet and golden. In a snug burrow at the western edge of the Westfarthing, an elderly hobbit-lady named **Daisy** sat contentedly by her open window. The evening air brought in the scent of honeysuckle from the garden, and far-off crickets were beginning their nightly chorus. Daisy's hair was now silvered and her face lined with gentle years, yet her eyes were as bright and curious as ever. She rocked slowly in her chair, savoring the peace. In her lap lay a small embroidered blanket she had been mending, though at the moment her needle rested idle. She was listening to the familiar sounds of family in the smial – soft footsteps and the clink of teacups – and thinking how blessed an ordinary evening could be.

On this evening, Daisy's **grandchildren** were visiting, filling the house with youthful chatter and energy. Just now, two little hobbits scampered into the parlor where Daisy sat: a rosy-cheeked lad of about eight and his younger sister, barely six. They had been put into their nightshirts and had that freshly-scrubbed look of children ready for bed, but their wide eyes showed no intention of sleep yet.

"*Gran, please!*" begged the little girl, climbing up onto a footstool beside Daisy's chair. "Won't you tell us a story before bed?" Her brother nodded eagerly in agreement. "**Yes, please, Grandma Daisy!** We want *the* story – you know, our favorite one!"

Daisy raised an eyebrow in playful confusion, though she knew very well what story they meant. "*The* story?" she said, setting aside her mending. "And which one would that be, pray tell? Is it the tale of Captain Bullroarer Took and the goblin's head? Or maybe old Mr. Bilbo's adventure with the dragons and treasure?"

The children giggled and shook their heads. "No, not those! The one *you* always tell," the boy clarified, bouncing on his toes. "The one about the Elf **under the stars**!"

"Ah," Daisy laughed softly, her hazel eyes shining. "Of course. *That* story." She leaned forward and whispered as if sharing a secret, "The time I met an Elf at the far edge of the Shire, is that the one you mean?"

Both grandchildren nodded furiously and climbed up onto the cozy settee by the window. They nestled against either side of Daisy, faces upturned expectantly. This had clearly become a beloved ritual. Daisy's heart swelled with fondness – she remembered herself as a little girl, begging her own grandfather for tales of wandering Elves and distant towers. Now here she was, many years later, in her grandfather's place, with little ones of her own blood pleading for *just one more* bedtime story. It was a sweet turn of the wheel of time. Daisy smiled, wrapping an arm around each child. "Very well, my dears. Settle in and I will tell it."

Outside, the first stars were winking to life in the indigo sky. Daisy gazed for a moment through the round window at the westward horizon, where the dark silhouettes of the distant **Far Downs** rose like gentle ramparts. A single bright star glimmered above those hills. With a contented sigh, she began her tale in a soft, lyrical voice.

“Once upon a time,” Daisy said, “when your Grandma was a young hobbit-lass – not so very much older than you are now – she decided to take a little *walk* far beyond her home.”

The boy interrupted immediately, eyes sparkling. “Beyond the Shire, you mean? All the way past the Far Downs?”

“Yes indeed,” Daisy nodded. “Beyond the farthest fields we know. I was quite adventurous that day. I walked until I came to the very end of the Shire – to those Far Downs out west. The sun had set, and the stars were just coming out. And there, on a hilltop, I found the ruins of an **ancient stone tower**.”

The little girl gasped in delight. “A tower! Like a castle?”

“It was a bit like a castle tower,” Daisy said. She closed her eyes briefly, recalling the sight. “Tall and white it was, even in ruins, with broken stones all around. The tower stood on the highest hill, and it gleamed faintly under the moon. I climbed up to those ruins, curious and quiet as a mouse.” Daisy lowered her voice to a hush, and the children leaned in. “And at the top, amid those old stones, I realized I was *not alone*.”

The grandchildren held their breaths. Daisy continued, her gaze distant as she painted the scene. “There was someone else there – a stranger, standing in the starlight. He was **an Elf**.”

“Ohhh,” the two breathed in unison. Though they had heard this story before, it never failed to entrance them. In the firelight of the parlor, their faces were full of wonder.

“What did he look like?” the boy whispered, as if the Elf might hear. “Was he very tall? Did he have a sword or a crown?”

Daisy chuckled softly. “Tall he was, yes – at least tall for a hobbit’s eyes, though not so giant as a Big Folk. He had no crown, and I saw no sword. He wore simple grey and silver robes that flowed in the breeze. But I tell you, children, he **shone** all the same. His hair was long and golden-silver, and it shimmered like starlight. His eyes were bright, kind, and ancient all at once – as if he had seen many summers and winters beyond count. I was a little afraid at first to see such a person, but also terribly *curious*.”

Daisy’s voice grew warm as she remembered. “I thought to hide behind a stone, but the Elf noticed me right away – sharp eyes they have, you know. Yet he did not chase me off nor frighten me. He smiled and spoke to me as gently as you’d speak to a friend. He greeted me in the common tongue, saying, ‘Welcome, little hobbit.’”

The little girl sighed happily. “He *knew* you were a hobbit!”

“He did. I suppose he knew of our folk. Perhaps he’d even met one of us before. There are tales of Elves visiting the Shire now and then.” Daisy gave her a wink. “At any rate, he wasn’t surprised to find me there. In fact, he was very kind. He told me his name was **Aerandir**, and that he was glad for some company under the stars.”

The boy’s brow furrowed in thought. “Aerandir... That’s an Elvish name, isn’t it? What does it mean?”

“I believe it means ‘Sea-wanderer’ in the Elven tongue,” answered Daisy. “Though I did not know it at the time. I only learned that later. He was one of the Elves who tended the White Towers near the Sea.”

She glanced down to see her grandson frowning slightly. Clearly, he was trying to imagine it all. Daisy went on with her story. “Aerandir was standing by that ruined tower for a reason. He told me he was keeping *watch*. You see, from those western hills one can almost see the Great Sea far beyond. That tower was called **Elostirion**, and long ago it held one of the Elf-stones that looked over the ocean. He and his kin were preparing to leave Middle-earth – to sail away on the last ships.”

“Leave Middle-earth?” the boy echoed, puzzled. He knew the Shire was part of Middle-earth; the idea of leaving it entirely was strange to him.

“Yes,” Daisy said softly. “To sail away over the ocean to a far-off land where most Elves went in the end. On that night, Aerandir was singing a farewell.” Her eyes grew misty at the memory of the haunting song the Elf had sung. “I crept closer, and I listened. He sang a hymn to the stars, to Elbereth, the Lady of the Stars. His voice was unlike any voice I had ever heard – clear and fair, and filled with sadness and beauty. The very trees listened, and the night fell silent around us, as if enchanted.”

The children sat rapt, hardly daring to breathe. Daisy could almost hear the echo of that ethereal song as she spoke. She smiled and continued, “When he finished his song, I was in tears – not of sorrow, but because it was so beautiful. I thanked him for it. And do you know what he did then?”

“What?” they whispered.

“He bowed to me,” Daisy said, her voice full of delight, “and he thanked *me* for listening! Imagine that – an Elf thanking a little hobbit!” She gave a gentle laugh. “Aerandir said it made him glad that one of the Little Folk heard and appreciated his song. And then he asked me…” – Daisy lowered her voice conspiratorially – “he asked me to sing *him* a song in return. A song of the Shire.”

Both grandchildren’s eyes went round as saucers. The boy laughed in disbelief. “**You** sang to *him*? Oh Grandma, were you scared?”

Daisy pretended to look modest, a hand on her chest. “I was *very* nervous, lovie. Imagine, after hearing such an Elven hymn, my own little voice felt terribly plain. At first I said I didn’t know if I could. But Aerandir encouraged me. He sat and waited ever so patiently. So I gathered up my courage and thought of a simple tune I knew – one my mother used to hum to me when I was small. And then, under that ruined tower in the dark of night, I sang a **hobbit lullaby** to the Elf.”

Both children beamed at this, for they knew at once which lullaby she meant. The little girl clapped her hands softly. “The *little star* song!” she piped.

Daisy nodded, humming a few notes of the melody. “Yes. A little lullaby about a friendly star watching over a traveler. I was shaking like a leaf at first, but I sang it as best I could. And do you know, Aerandir loved it. When I finished, he put his hand on his heart and said to me, ‘That was a beautiful little song. I feel as though the Shire itself were singing me to rest.’”

The children sighed with contentment, cuddling closer against Daisy's sides. They had heard this part before but loved it anew each time. The boy grinned up at his grandmother. "I bet you sang *very* nicely."

"Oh, I croaked like a frog at the start," Daisy teased, winking, "but I found my voice along the way." She gave him a playful squeeze. "The Elf's kind words made me very happy. After that, we sat and talked for a long while. I told him about our Shire – about our farms and our inns and our birthday parties and fireworks."

"And the food!" the boy added with a laugh, knowing hobbits well.

Daisy chuckled. "Yes, I even told him about our love of good food. In fact," she went on merrily, "I remember telling him a funny story about a farmer who once ate an entire seed-cake in one go. Aerandir laughed at that! He had never met folk quite like hobbits, I think."

Both children giggled, picturing an Elf laughing at such a silly tale. The little girl reached up and touched Daisy's round chin. "Grandma, did you have any food with you that night? Did you share supper with the Elf?"

"At first, I was too excited to think of eating," Daisy confessed. "I *had* packed a small supper – bread and cheese and even a jar of blackberry jam. But it sat forgotten in my basket while we talked and traded stories. Only when the night grew very late did I remember it. By then," she smiled, "I was hungry as a fox in a henhouse!"

Her grandchildren burst into laughter. They knew their grandma loved her supper as much as any hobbit. "I can't believe you forgot to eat!" the boy said, wiping a tear of laughter. "That *never* happens at home!"

"Well, meeting an Elf is not an everyday thing, dear," Daisy replied with an amused shrug. "It quite took my mind off my stomach for a while. But when my tummy finally *did* rumble, we both had a good laugh. Aerandir said that was a sure sign it was time for me to head home."

Her tone grew a touch wistful as she went on, "The night was nearly spent by then. The stars were fading because dawn was close. The Elf and I stood atop that hill and looked out west together one last time. The sky was dark blue, and we could see the slightest silver line far in the west that hinted of the Sea. Aerandir told me he would remember our chance meeting fondly. I thanked him for everything – for his song, and his stories, and his friendship." Daisy paused, her voice soft. "Then I asked him, very shyly, if we would ever meet again."

The children were utterly silent, listening. They knew this part was bittersweet. Daisy continued gently, "Aerandir didn't answer at first. He just looked at the sky with a faraway gaze. Then he said, '**Not in this world, perhaps.**' He told me that his people were leaving, and that he himself would sail on the next ship from the Grey Havens. But," – Daisy's face brightened – "he said *we would not truly be apart*. He told me that whenever I looked at the evening star, I could think of our meeting and know that friends are never truly lost as long as their memory shines."

"That's beautiful," whispered the little girl, eyes shining with unshed tears.

Daisy kissed the top of her curly head. “It was a beautiful farewell, my dear. He even gave me a blessing in Elvish, and I tried my tongue at a few Elvish words I had heard in his song.” She smiled mysteriously, recalling how she had echoed the name of Elbereth. “Then Aerandir bowed to me, and I curtsied to him. He walked away toward the west, singing softly as he went. I stood and listened until he vanished beyond the hills.”

The boy released a breath he had been holding. “And then you came home?”

“Yes,” Daisy said. “I came back over the Far Downs as morning broke. I slipped home just as the sun was rising. I was very tired – and very hungry – but *oh!* my heart was light as a feather. I felt as though I carried a marvelous secret, something no one else would believe.” She chuckled. “In fact, I didn’t tell anyone about it for a long time. Not until years later when I had children of my own… and then grandchildren who begged to hear it.”

She gave the two a tender squeeze. They responded by hugging her waist. “It’s the best story,” murmured the boy, snuggling close. “I wish *I* could meet an Elf someday.”

“Me too,” sighed his sister happily. “I would ask him to sing *me* a lullaby.”

Daisy smiled, her gaze drifting back to the window and the stars beyond. “Well, perhaps you will and perhaps you won’t. The Elves have all gone West now, far beyond the Sea. None walk in Middle-earth any longer, or so the tales say.” She saw their faces fall just a little at that, so she added brightly, “But who knows? The world is wide and full of wonders. Even a hobbit can stumble on magic in unexpected places. I did, after all.”

The children nodded, accepting this. They knew the Shire was safe and snug, but the hint of greater wonders beyond its borders filled their young minds with dreams. For a moment all three were silent. The little girl yawned and laid her head against Daisy’s arm. The boy fought to keep his eyes open, unwilling for the story-time to end. He peered up at Daisy with a drowsy yet earnest look.

“Grandma,” he murmured, “did it… did it *really* happen? Did you truly meet an Elf, or is that just a make-believe story?”

Daisy felt a familiar soft laugh welling up. The very same question her own children used to ask! She tapped the tip of the lad’s nose affectionately. “What do *you* think?” she replied, eyes twinkling.

The boy scrunched his nose, unsure how to answer. Before he could puzzle it out, Daisy gently shifted him off the settee. “That’s enough wondering for one night, my loves. Time you both were tucked in.” She rose, taking each child by the hand. They made small sleepy protests but didn’t truly object. The hour was late and their heads were nodding.

Daisy led them down the hall to the cozy guest bedroom where the children’s beds were laid out – one on each side of the low window. The room was dim, lit only by a single candle that cast dancing shadows on the round walls. With practiced ease, Daisy pulled back the soft quilts. The grandchildren climbed in, still aglow from the tale but clearly growing sleepy. Daisy drew the covers up to their chins and kissed each smooth forehead. “Thank you, Grandma,” murmured the girl, already halfway to a dream. “It’s such a lovely story…”

“Can we hear the lullaby? Just once more?” the boy mumbled, his voice muffled in his pillow. “Please?”

Daisy’s heart gave a tender ache. The way he asked was almost exactly as his father – Daisy’s own son – used to plead years ago. Some things never changed. “Of course,” she whispered. “Just once more.” She settled in a chair between the little beds and began to **sing in a low, sweet voice**, the same gentle Shire lullaby that she had sung on that distant night under the tower. Her words floated like a soft breeze through the room:

> Little star above the hill,
> Shining when the night grows still,
> Send a breeze to guide my way,
> Keep me safe till break of day,
> Watch and guard me through the night,
> Until the dawn brings morning light.

The melody was simple and soothing, the **hobbit-words** familiar and comforting. As Daisy sang, the children’s eyelids grew heavier and heavier. The little girl’s thumb found its way into her mouth; the boy’s breathing grew slow and even. By the final gentle line of the lullaby, both were fast asleep, tucked in safe and sound.

Daisy ceased singing and sat for a moment in the hush, watching the rise and fall of their small chests and the flicker of starlight on their curly hair. Their faces by candle-glow were peaceful and full of innocent dreams. She felt a well of love and wonder fill her: these little ones, who carried forward not only the blood of the Shire but also its stories and secrets. Leaning over, she silently kissed each child once more – a brush of lips on brow – and then tiptoed out of the room, taking care to leave the door open a crack.

The smial was very quiet now. Down the hall, Daisy’s own daughter (the children’s mother) had fallen asleep too, and her son-in-law was softly snoring in the guest cot. All were abed except Daisy. The old hobbit-lady fetched a light shawl and stepped out of the front door into her **moonlit garden**.

It was a clear night. The **Moon** hung high over the Shire, and countless stars were strewn across the sky like diamonds on dark velvet. Pale moonlight silvered the neatly kept garden path and shimmered on the round windows of the burrow. The air was cool and sweet, alive with the faint smells of dew on grass and the last blooms of evening primrose opening to the night. Daisy drew the shawl around her shoulders and breathed in deeply. Though her joints were not as spry as in youth, she moved with a certain lightness in her step, guided by habit through her little gate and into the yard beyond.

Daisy’s garden had grown over the years, much like her family. There was a sturdy wooden swing hanging from the big oak (her dear Hugo had built it for the children many summers ago), and the flower beds had multiplied and flourished under loving care. She passed the old oak now, trailing a hand along its rough bark. The swing swayed gently in the night breeze, creaking ever so softly as if ghosts of laughter still pushed it. Daisy smiled at the memory of her children (and later grandchildren) shrieking with delight as they swung under its branches. So many seasons had come and gone; so many partings and meetings life had brought. She had seen her children grow up and start families of their own, said farewell to beloved kin, and welcomed new faces into the world. Through all those years, the Shire remained peaceful and constant – and yet, *even the Shire* had changed in quiet ways.

Daisy walked to the low garden gate and unlatched it. Just beyond lay a small rise crowned with clover – a familiar little hillock she had loved since girlhood. Slowly, Daisy climbed up to the top of that knoll. The grass was cool under her feet. From here she had a broad view westward. The **Far Downs** rolled away in sleeping shadows under the starlight. And beyond them, unseen but remembered, lay the Tower Hills where once a white tower had stood glimmering against the night.

She stood still, listening to the silence. A faint night wind was blowing from the west, rippling through the tall grasses and carrying the distant scent of wild heather. Daisy reached into the neckline of her dress and drew forth a small pendant that hung always around her neck on a fine silver chain. It was cool to the touch and set with a **white crystal** that glowed with a soft inner light. After so many years it still shone gently, as if a star had been caught in glass. Aerandir's gift – the *star-glass* pendant – had become Daisy's constant companion, though she kept it hidden from casual eyes. Now, in the privacy of night, she held it up and let its pale glow mingle with the starlight.

Gazing west, Daisy felt her heart fill with a deep, bittersweet longing. Not a sadness, exactly – for she was content – but a wistful wonder at all that had been, and all that had passed beyond recall. On nights like this, the memories came easily, vivid as yesterday. She remembered the gleaming ruins of Elostirion on that enchanted night, the Elf standing tall and sad and wise beneath the stars, the echo of his voice as he sang farewell. She remembered the **starry sky** above the tower, and how one bright star had seemed to burn with special radiance. Even now, Daisy picked it out among the heavens – the Evening Star, Eärendil's star, peeping above the far western horizon. It glinted like a diamond on the edge of the world.

"**Elbereth Gilthoniel,**" Daisy whispered, her voice carrying the soft shape of the Elven words. It was an invocation of the Star-kindler, a phrase of blessing and remembrance that she had learned long ago. As the ancient Elvish syllables left her lips, the Evening Star seemed to flicker, almost as if in answer. A single silver ray fell upon her upturned face. Daisy's eyes shone with unshed tears, but she smiled. She pressed the glowing pendant gently against her chest. A familiar calm settled over her, as warm and bright as a hearth-fire on a cold night.

All the Elves were gone now from Middle-earth – their white ships had sailed to the Uttermost West in the years since Daisy's youth. Even the Tower Hills stood empty, their watch over. In the Shire, folk spoke of those times in hushed, reverent tones: the passing of an age. Daisy herself had heard the King's messengers announce the **gift of the Westmarch** to the Shire, granting hobbits domain over the very lands she once explored in secret. How extraordinary it had seemed that the unknown world beyond the Far Downs was now just another part of the Shire, open for farming and settling! Some younger hobbits had even built new homesteads near the ancient towers. The thought always made Daisy quietly amazed – life had a way of turning wonders into everyday things over time.

Yet, on this quiet night, Daisy felt that the **magic of that past night** had not truly faded. It lived on in her heart, in her stories, and in her family. She had kept her promise – the promise she never spoke aloud but had carried all her life. She remembered how she had vowed in her heart to treasure the beauty she'd seen and to share it in gentle ways. For years she had done just that: telling and retelling the tale to wide-eyed little ones, singing the lullaby, passing on a spark of wonder to those who would follow. In doing so, she knew that a small part of the Elves' light would **never be lost**. It would endure, carried in the memories and imaginations of the Shire's next generation.

Daisy stood for a long moment, letting these thoughts wash over her like the cool night air. Overhead, the wheeling stars blinked and the moon cast her silver shadows. The old hobbit-lass closed her eyes and simply listened. In the leaves of the trees and the rustle of far-off grasses, she fancied she could hear a familiar harmony: the echo of a fair Elven song mingling with a hobbit's soft laughter. It was as if some fragment of that long-ago meeting under the stars still **lingered in the breeze**, a secret melody that only hearts attuned to wonder could hear.

When Daisy opened her eyes, they were drawn westward one last time. Across the dark outlines of the Far Downs, the **evening star** glimmered bravely, a tiny beacon of light on the rim of night. Daisy's lips curved in an affectionate smile. "Good night, my friend," she whispered, as if speaking to the star – or to the memory of the Elf who had given her this gift of light and friendship so many years ago. The star twinkled once more and remained shining, constant and true.

At peace, Daisy Brockhouse Hayward (for that was her proper name now, though in her heart she was still the same curious hobbit-lass) turned and began to make her way back to the warm light of her smial. The night would be long and tranquil, and she was ready for a bit of sleep herself. As she walked, the grass whispered against her feet and the night wind gently followed at her back. Far behind her, beyond the Far Downs, the Western Sea lay under the same blanket of stars, and somewhere beyond that horizon an **Elf** remembered a small hobbit with a bright spirit. But here in the Shire, Daisy's own part in that great story had quietly come full circle. She had gone there and back again, out of the familiar and into wonder, and returned home to a happily settled life – albeit one with a shining secret.

Before re-entering her round door, Daisy glanced once more at the deep, star-lit sky. She felt no regret, only gratitude. Magic and home, the ordinary and the extraordinary, had met for one beautiful moment in her life and would live on through her kin. With a last look to the west and a soft hum of the little star lullaby on her breath, Daisy slipped inside, leaving the night to itself. And if ever one were to wander near those far western downs on a clear summer night, they might just feel it too – in the gentle sigh of the breeze over the hills – an **echo of that meeting under the stars**, a faint mingling of hobbit laughter and Elven song, shining forever in memory beneath the endless sky.